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PRISON LIFE *is* EASY *for a*
Villainess 2



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Chapter 6: So Long, Sykes

29: The Young Lady's Basement Session

"Isn't there anything? Anything?!"

Prince Elliott's temper was out of control today, as per usual. His fiancée, who'd shut herself up in the dungeon, had made a fool of him. He needed to do something, anything, to get back at her or he'd never calm down.

Initially, Elliott had just planned to make her beg for her life, but now things had gotten far out of hand. The goalposts were moving, but... Well, he'd just pretend not to notice that inconvenient detail. Living in the now. That was Elliott.

George Ferguson, the son of Duke Ferguson, had served as Elliott's adviser until just the other day, but he'd been forced to step away from their group of close associates for unavoidable reasons. His fiancée had returned from a trip abroad and now had him completely under her thumb, so he was prioritizing his education as family heir. She was putting him through the wringer from morning to night, day after day.

When Elliott saw how ragged George looked, he couldn't help but cry for his friend. Elliott knew it had to be this way, but still. He suspected that the fiancée in question was an agent of his own enemy, Rachel Ferguson, summoned to take George out of the picture. Rachel had used an ally that her target couldn't fight back against. How could she be so underhanded?!

In the name of world peace, and the dazzling future that awaited him with Margaret, Elliott reaffirmed his determination to make Rachel say uncle, no matter what it took. That said, Elliott was always on the back foot, and he'd yet to beat her. He'd held meetings with his associates, but no one had ever managed to suggest a cunning enough plan. If they had, he'd have beaten Rachel by now.

As everyone pondered the matter and groaned thoughtfully, Margaret entered with tea.

"Here you are, everyone!"

"Thank you!"

The men crowded around the tea their "angel" had brought them while Margaret glanced through the meeting's minutes.

"Having trouble coming up with a good idea, Prince Elliott?" she asked him.

“Yeah, nothing feels right. And she probably has a counter to everything we come up with.”

The prince was overwhelmed, and he hadn’t even begun to fight.

Looking through the list of previous attack plans and their disappointing results, Margaret pointed to one line. “Prince Elliott, you don’t have to come up with a new idea. Why not improve upon something Rachel did to you, and turn the tables on her? This is the best she could come up with. If you expand on it and send it right back, there won’t be anything she can do, right?”

It was merely a casual suggestion, but Elliott slapped his thigh and declared, “That’s it!”

The prince was rather dull-witted.

Elliott set about cheerfully constructing a new plan, displaying quite a few traits that called into question his capacity as a future ruler.



After spending her day in sloth and indolence, as per usual, Rachel set about making her bed so she could go to sleep.

“Hmm.”

Just as she was considering whether to put a few drops of lavender oil on her pillow, she heard the creak of the door opening and the footsteps of several noisy guests descending the stairs—the prince and his entourage, of course.

“Oh, my. Fancy seeing you at this hour,” Rachel said.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Sorry to bother you, Rachel!” Elliott replied enthusiastically.

“You really are a bother.”

Rachel was a little confused to see Elliott so oddly energetic when it was already night. His excessive exuberance likely meant that he wasn’t quite right in the head.

Elliott was holding something that looked a lot like a violin. No, it was a violin. Behind Elliott was Sykes, carrying two barrels. Margaret, holding a bunch of pots, followed behind Sykes. And behind Margaret stood another guy, whom Rachel couldn’t even remember the name of, with a bunch of empty cans. Bringing up the rear, the prison guard held up a triangle, looking sick of this already.

Rachel pressed a hand against her forehead. “I have no idea what all of you are up to.”

“Mwa ha ha ha ha, what do you think, Rachel? Take a guess!” Elliott said gleefully.

“Collecting garbage, perhaps?”

“Is that a prince’s job?”

“Well, coming down to the dungeon when he has no good reason

to isn't a prince's job either, I'm sure."

The bizarre band began laying down the junk they'd brought in the front room of the prison.

Once she saw their setup, Rachel figured out what they were planning. Those pots were supposed to be a drum set.

"I see. You plan to keep me from sleeping, is that it?" Rachel asked.

Elliott smirked, posing with the violin as he addressed Rachel in an affected manner. "We wanted to have a little night practice and needed somewhere where it wouldn't matter if the sound echoed. We decided no one would mind if we used the dungeon. We're just going to play on our own, so feel free to go to bed—it really doesn't matter to me."

Elliott's face practically shouted, "Got you!"

"Now, I don't mind if you listen, of course. I'd love to hear your impressions when we're finished."

The group all made a show of putting in their earplugs and tuning their "instruments." Elliott's violin squeaked like an iron door that hadn't been used in a century. Sykes whaled on the barrels like an idiot, raising a thunderous roar, and Margaret hit the assembled pots with a stick, producing a high-pitched metallic clanging. The guy named Wolanski, if the name they called him by was to be trusted, shook some empty cans dangling from strings, while the prison guard, whose mind seemed to be elsewhere, struck the triangle at arrhythmic intervals.

An unruly cacophony filled the dungeon. They were all just making awful sounds independent of one another, so even with earplugs, it still hurt to listen.

"This is surprisingly fun!" Elliott shouted.

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Sykes cried, embracing his inner percussionist.

"Um, do I really need to take part in this?" the prison guard mumbled, but his words got lost in the racket.

Rachel put in the earplugs she used for her afternoon naps and sat down in her chair to watch.

Her silence was unnerving, but the lack of any immediate counterattack put Elliott in an even better mood.

"Let's do this thing!" Elliott hollered, rousing his fellow band members.

"Yeah!" Sykes cheered.

The prison guard simply muttered, "Umm, my shift is over, so I'd like to go home now..."

"Ha ha ha, we're going to go all night!" Elliott declared.

Despite his meticulous planning, Elliott had overlooked an

interesting phenomenon. Though they were just hitting things with wild abandon, after so long, they couldn't help but fall into beat. Even if they thought they were just creating meaningless noise, order would eventually arise from the chaos.

Ever so gradually, a pattern was born from the cacophony.

Rachel, who'd been listening with her eyes closed, suddenly stood up. She dug through her mountain of wooden boxes and returned carrying her trumpet—the same trumpet that had noisily awakened Elliott on a previous night. She raised her instrument to her lips, closed her eyes, filled her lungs with air, and began to blow.

A marvelous and confident melody arose from the chaotic soundscape. And in that moment, history moved.

Out of all those present, Rachel was probably the only one with any musical training. When she joined the fray, the rest of the “instruments,” which had been competing for attention, found a common direction. The other performers, who'd already started to establish the beat on their own, got sucked into the flow.

The violin's melody shifted to match Rachel's. The rhythm of the pots changed. Before they knew what had happened, the six “instruments” began to play in time with one another. Still, the awkward ensemble wasn't fully lining up, resulting in a frustrating dissonance. Although their initial goal had been no more than to produce unpleasant noise, everyone now listened closely, trying desperately to match the other's rhythm.

“Guh! I'm supposed to be the star here! The way things are going, Rachel will swallow us up!”

Elliott desperately dragged his bow over the strings, sounding worse than a cat raking its claws on glass. He couldn't let Rachel jump in and take control of the ensemble. Having completely lost sight of his original goal, he vied with the trumpet for the melody.

Rachel's trumpet rang out, its tone dripping with soul. Elliott's violin screamed with passion. Sykes struck his barrels in a spirited rhythm, and Margaret charmed them all with a beautiful cooking-pot drum solo in the interlude. Wolanski was absorbed in himself, shaking his bundle of empty cans. The prison guard, who just wanted to go home, unenthusiastically struck his triangle.

It was perfection—a perfect session. Their individual personalities collided and bounced off one another, yet together they formed a single sound.

There was no score, no particular piece they were attempting to play. Instead, the improvised melody grew and wrapped itself around the six musicians, eventually giving birth to a new composition. However, there was no audience to hear it and no one to transcribe the sound. Only an ephemeral soul, filling this one moment in time.

Five of them gave themselves up to the music, the likes of which they would never hear again. And then there was the guard, who just wanted to go home.

Just as their crescendo reached the moment of nirvana...

“You’re too loud! What time do you think it is?!”

The chief lady-in-waiting came in shouting, breaking the sonorous spell.

She snatched the violin away from Elliott and said, “Enough is enough, Your Highness! I understand you want to play around, but you are not a little child! You realize that a large number of people live in the palace, right?!”

Elliott’s eyes darted about. “M-Me and the others were—”

“The others and I!”

“Right! Th-The others and I didn’t mean to disturb you...”

“It’s not normal to gather all this garbage and pretend to be a band in the middle of the night!”

“I’m sorry!”

“B-But ma’am,” Sykes butted in, “His Highness was doing it to teach Miss Rachel...” He was about to say, “a lesson,” but he stopped himself.

The chief lady-in-waiting sighed and nodded. “Yes, that too! Even if the underground dungeon keeps the sound from echoing outside, did none of you spare a thought for the trouble you were causing Lady Ferguson, who is shut in here and can’t leave?! Look, the poor dear’s buried her head under the covers.”

“Huh?”

They all turned to see Rachel, who’d been putting on a heated performance with her trumpet just moments ago, curled up in a ball in her bed.

“You poor thing. Locked up in here, and then subjected to this kind of awful imposition on top of it.”

“No, no, wait! Until just now, Rachel was—”

The prince tried to defend himself, but Rachel poked her head out from under the blankets, tears in her eyes. “Ma’am...” she said with a sob, “I was tired, but His Highness and his friends forced their way in here.”

“Y-You’re trying to act like you weren’t involved?! That’s not fair!”

“Urgh... It was awful...”

“Well, I never!” cried the chief lady-in-waiting. “Your Highness! Don’t you feel sorry for Lady Ferguson, being forced to endure this nuisance so late at night?!”

“No, listen, she was in on it too!”

“After what I’ve seen, how can you say that?! Come upstairs! I

need to have a word with you!”

“He’s telling the truth! Believe us!” Sykes begged.

In disbelief, Margaret asked, “Wait, us too?”

“And me?! Why?! I want to go home already!” the guard wailed.

“Silence!”

The chief lady-in-waiting escorted the impromptu band out, with the exception of Rachel, and lectured them until morning.



It was so quiet in the prison that the improvised performance seemed like it had all been a lie.

Shrugging it off, Rachel readied her pillow and turned out the lights.

30: The Young Lady Exercises

Rachel looked up from her book. Her ears perked up, and she listened to the faint voices coming from outside. Somewhere off in the distance, somebody was barking orders.

“Is this...the knight training, perhaps?” she wondered aloud.

As she listened to the voices, too far away to make out words, Rachel suddenly realized something.

“Come to think of it, it’s been a while since I’ve exercised.”

Rachel was never the type to get fired up about athletics, but between walking around the palace and keeping up with her royal instructors, she’d exercised much more than she did now, confined to this room. Not that the lack of exercise had made her put on weight or anything.

“Maybe the lack of exercise is the reason I’ve been such a light sleeper lately.”

It was evidently affecting her rest, although all the naps probably had something to do with it too.

“Mrrgh!” Rachel puffed up her cheeks and glared adorably at the sky. “Yes, that was probably to be expected. If all I do is stay inside my cell, I’ll never get tired out, after all.”

She needed to move around more. A normal person would have been emotionally exhausted by this situation, but Rachel was perfectly fine with it, so the sedentary lifestyle was becoming unhealthy.

“This won’t do. In my time as His Highness’s fiancée, my lessons exhausted me every day. When I got in bed, I was always out in five seconds.”

That was unhealthy in its own way.

Rachel slapped her knee. “Now that I think of it, I came prepared with exercise equipment I could use inside the prison.”

Armed with a new idea, Rachel opened a wooden box and went looking for the sporting goods.

"Let's see. I bought something because it looked interesting at the time... Ah, here it is."



As he walked along the corridor on his way back from watching Sykes's knight training, Elliott noticed an odd sound coming from the rear gardens.

"Hey, do you hear a grinding sound?" he asked.

Sykes and Wolanski, who were following him, listened and then looked at each other.

"I do hear something," said Wolanski, "but what is it?"

"It's kinda like rock being ground down," Sykes added.

Following Sykes's instincts, they looked for the source and ended up at the door to the dungeon. They could now clearly make out the sound of something chipping away at stone inside there.

"Oh, come on. It's her, again?" Elliott complained.

"If something weird is happening near the rear gardens, it's pretty much always because of Rachel now," Sykes noted.

Sure that Rachel was up to no good, they descended the stairs and found her grinding away at the wall with a crank-type hand drill.

"Hey, Rachel," Elliott called.

"Your Highness? Did you have some business with me?"

Rachel was at a good stopping point, so she turned around and wiped her brow. She was dressed rather scantily, her bare arms and legs visible, and she'd worked up quite a sweat drilling holes in the wall, so the men couldn't bear to look directly at her.

"Even if there's no one around to see, how can you dress like that?" Elliott asked.

"I simply changed into something easier to exercise in," Rachel replied.

Elliott and the others looked at her hands.

"Hey, Sykes, has rock drilling become a sport recently?" Elliott asked.

"Miss Rachel's doing it, so...maybe?" Sykes answered.

Wolanski interjected and asked, "Why are we learning trends from a prisoner?"

As the three of them whispered back and forth, Rachel, who'd been wiping her face vigorously with a towel, looked at them with exasperation. "Come now, this isn't a stonemasons' athletic meet. I've never heard of any sport like that."

"Huh? But you said you were exercising," Elliott pointed out. "What were you doing, then?"

Looking at Rachel's hands again, Elliott watched as she laid down the drill and picked up a protruding object attached to a shaft. It was small enough to fit in her hand and looked like a stone half-buried in the dirt. He watched Rachel hammer the shaft into the hole she'd made. Looking more closely, Elliott saw a number of these stonelike objects, all in various shapes and sizes, attached to the wall.

"What are all these?!" he asked.

The wall, its stones laid in an alternating pattern, was covered in a bunch of protrusions. In a way, it resembled a big boulder awash in the waves and covered by starfish. It looked kind of creepy.

Having finished her work, Rachel answered, "Hand- and footholds."

"Hand---and footholds?" Elliott echoed.

Covering her hands in some chalky powder, Rachel grabbed one of the protrusions, making as if to climb the wall. "Okay, looks like it's good to go!" she reported with a self-satisfied smile.

"I still have no idea what you're doing."

Rachel powdered her hands, then used her fingers and toes to climb the wall with the protrusions. Judging by the motions Rachel was testing out, this was apparently the "exercise" she'd been talking about.

"What are you doing, ultimately?" Elliott asked.

"Bouldering!" Rachel declared confidently.

Elliott glanced at Sykes. "You know what that is?"

"It's a sport, a technique where you climb large rocks without using any tools. Not something you'd normally do in prison." Sykes was too astonished to say any more.

Rachel nodded. "Yes, that's right. This prison just doesn't have the height, you see."

"Uh, no," Sykes said, shaking his head. "That's not the problem here, okay?" Rachel was focused on the entirely wrong thing, but he just didn't know where to start with her.

Ignoring Sykes, Rachel clapped her hands as if she'd just had a great idea. "I know! Would it be all right if I were to punch a hole through the ceiling, Your Highness?"

"No!" Elliott yelled. "And, hold on, don't go putting holes in the prison walls either! What're you going to do with all these weird things sticking out?"

"They're not 'weird things.' They're hand- and footholds."

"'Weird things' is good enough! Don't go remodeling the prison without permission!"

Rachel pursed her lips, seemingly offended by this condemnation. "But you smiled when I painted a picture..." she said, pouting.

"Who smiled?! I fainted from the wretched smell!" Elliott

explained.

“Now, now. Like with the painting, if you don’t want me to do something, you really need to say so in advance. It’s too late once I’ve already done it, don’t you think?”

“Then come get permission first! ‘It’s too late’ isn’t going to cut it! Once you’re out of the dungeon, I swear I’m going to make you put things back as they were, you hear me?!”

“I’m in here until I die, aren’t I? I couldn’t care less what happens after I’m dead.”

“You can get out by apologizing, you know?!”

“I don’t want to.”



Tired from yelling at Rachel, who wasn’t paying him any attention anyway, Elliott left the dungeon feeling dejected. He gazed up to the reddening sky with a sigh.

“Hey, Sykes...” he asked.

“What’s up, Your Highness?”

“When women exercise in thin clothing...” The scenes from before were playing over and over in Elliott’s head. “It’s pretty sweet.”

Sykes, who had the same far-off look in his eyes, nodded. “Yeah. About the only time I liked Martina was when she was all sweaty.”

Beside them, Wolanski was writhing. “The way... The way she casually rubbed her face with that towel... It emphasized her lack of makeup, and that’s so hot! Yes, natural beauty really is the best!”

Three pubescent boys closed their eyes, savoring the images that still lingered behind their eyelids.

31: The Girl Shouts at the Dawning Sun

Early one morning, in the chapel, Margaret was kneeling in front of the altar and praying fervently. To be more accurate, she *looked* like she was praying fervently.

The chapel was the best place to sort your thoughts out without being disturbed. That was something Margaret’s mother had taught her.

“It’s rude to interrupt someone when they’re praying. Even if you’re normally popular, people won’t disturb you there.”

“More importantly, whenever there’s something you want to complain about, it’s usually God’s fault.”

Remembering what her mother had said, Margaret put her hands together, closed her eyes, and bowed her head. To others, she would have looked like a devout believer, and the words she mumbled to herself would, from a distance, have seemed like a prayer. But under

her breath, so quiet not even someone beside her could have heard, she was saying, "I've come this far, so why is it I can't make it this one last step, God?! I finally, finally managed to get myself a prince, you know?!"

Margaret put on an act for men, but never for God. Not only would she tell him the truth, she would demand things too.

"The prince is head over heels for me, but if that damn woman won't surrender, it might all get turned around when the king comes back! Do you understand that? Get to work already, would you?"

Her head bowed, Margaret clenched her interlocked fingers tighter.

"Okay, yes, I'm grateful for the good fortune I've had so far. I mean, a girl born in the slums like I was is doing well if she makes it to the age of ten still healthy. And I grew up to be prettier than just about anyone. And mom managed to land herself a baron before I got sold off to some old pedo. And all those wealthy noble boys are losing their heads over how cute I am. Even the prince prefers me over that ruthless psycho he was engaged to. Now I've just gotta keep running toward my happily ever after!"

The more Margaret talked, the more her frustration grew, and her mumbling got louder and louder.

"Do you know how hard it was to get this far? Sure, the guys were easy to win over, but the bullying from the other girls was just awful. Those blue-blooded sows need to get their act together! Bunch of monkeys who think they're so much better than me! 'Stay away from my fiancé!' Huh? You're the ones who drove your fiancés away with your overbearing attitudes. Who told them to their faces that you were only marrying them for political reasons, huh?! Are you all stupid, panicking when I'm a little nice to your men and worrying I'm gonna steal them?! You are stupid, aren't you?! Just die, you cows! It was your indifference that ruined their image of you and made them look elsewhere!"

Margaret's voice kept getting louder. Her shoulders heaved with anger.

"Acting friendly and compassionate is the very basics, right?! Men are simple. If you just tell them, 'You're the only one for me!' and, 'I understand you. You're trying so hard!' and, 'No matter what anyone else says, I'll always be with you!' they'll be into you! And you tell me, 'Don't say anything to a man he doesn't need to hear.' Huh?! You're the ones not saying what needs to be said, damn it! I'm putting in the work to be likable! Put some effort in, you goddamn high-society do-nothings! You get married with that kind of attitude, pump out one son, and then you go on to live the high life?! What is this bullshit?!"

Boiling over with rage, Margaret was now shouting at the top of

her lungs.

“You act all smug, not even paying attention to your own ‘customers,’ and if someone like me comes in and takes over the ‘contract,’ you say they’re ignoring the rules of ‘business’?! Then do the work to win them back, you elites! Even the lowliest whore knows how to look after her regulars! I’m not gonna buy that you can’t do it!”

Margaret was so angry that she forgot she was pretending to pray.

“I’m going to make Prince Elliott mine and look down on all of them! My mother may have been a prostitute from the slums, but she worked her way up to a baroness by carefully choosing her clients. With the looks I inherited from her, I’m going to shoot all the way from a baronial house to the very top!”

Margaret put her foot on the altar and struck a victory pose. It didn’t get more impious than that. Finished with her venting, she took a deep breath and calmed down. She crossed her arms and glared up at the sky. In front of God.

“Still, if I can’t do something about that Rachel, my future with Prince Elliott isn’t looking so rosy. I don’t know for sure, but she doesn’t seem that into him. He’s so cool, so why does she take that attitude with him? George is cool too, though, so she may just be used to it. But Prince Elliott is extra cool. What’s she so dissatisfied with?”

Mostly, what was inside.

“Well, she does look good. Maybe it’s because she’s used to having men fawn over her.”

Probably not.

“Ever since she went into the dungeon—maybe it’s the thin clothes she wears now?—her looks stand out all the more. She really has that figure without a corset? I mean, her waist is like this, and her bust... Is she seriously not padding it? And looking at her butt, she’s got long legs too...”

Margaret had been paying a surprising amount of attention. Although, unlike the stupid men, she wasn’t getting all excited about a little skin.

Margaret snapped back to her senses. “Wait... Her face is a match for mine, and her figure’s ridiculously good. And she’s a duke’s daughter, and smart? The king and queen are fond of her, and she’s able to fend off anything Elliott throws at her...”

Margaret was aghast. She glared at the altar, thrusting a finger at the statue of the Lord.

“Hold on, God! What’s the meaning of this?! She’s highborn, blessed with talent, and has good luck! You’ve been showing favoritism to Rachel! Isn’t it your job to distribute fortune equally?! Work for all the donations people give you, you wage thief! Um...not

that I object to your showing me a little extra fortune, okay?"

Margaret brought her hand to her chin, thinking as she paced back and forth in front of the altar.

"Where did this difference come from? No, am I thinking about this wrong to begin with? Rachel's been given too much, right? I haven't fully joined the upper class yet, but there are nobles out there who are less impressive than her, right? What is it that made her allotment of divine grace so much greater than mine?"

Margaret suddenly stopped. Her fingers were quivering.

"It can't be... But it must... This has to be it!" Spinning around ninety degrees, she pointed at the statue of the Lord again and shouted, "God, the truth is you're a sucker for good looks, and you have no self-restraint, right?! Rachel and I are lucky because we're pretty, and Rachel gets even more special treatment because of her figure! That's it, right?! Damn it! I've solved the mystery!"

Margaret stomped her feet as she shouted crackpot theories at the altar. She'd gone beyond impiety and into the kind of blasphemy that could get you smote.

"The pieces all fit! Damn it! If that's the reason for God's favoritism, I'll never be able to beat Rachel! You dirty old pervert! If that's how it works, all my almsgiving up until now has been pointless! Damn it all! I always thought if I just prayed, everything would work out somehow! Give me back my innocence!"

Margaret had never had the kind of praiseworthy faith that asked nothing in return, and the total value of all the alms she'd ever given was so low that she could easily pay that much again with what was in her wallet, but she was going to totally ignore that.



Hearing some sort of clamor, the priest rushed to the chapel and saw that the doors were ajar. He thought that maybe an animal had gotten inside and was yowling about something.

"Did a cat in heat get in there?" He approached to investigate, but before he could open it, the double doors opened. "Hm?"

A pretty girl with her hair in pigtails had her hands on the handles. She was hanging her head, and her shoulders were trembling.

"Oh, hello, little girl. Is something the matter?" the priest asked.

"God is..."

"Yes?"

The adorable girl looked up to the heavens, her face twisted into a demonic grimace.

"God is dead!"

"What?!"

As the priest fell on his backside, Margaret ran off crying.

“Damn it! Damn it all! Even if God doesn’t love me, I’m still gonna rise to the top!”

Even if God favors Rachel because he’s a sucker for a pretty face, I’m going to knock her out and be the one to marry Prince Elliott! Go, go, Margaret! You can do it, me! You don’t have to pay interest, but I want my donations back, God!

Even if God was favoring her rival, Margaret wouldn’t give in. She had all the vitality of a weed, and she was willing to do anything. She’d outdo Rachel with her own pretty face and gumption.

Margaret glared ahead of her as she ran. “Wait, I know... It might be fun to pit noble against noble. If I stir up those ugly girls who were after Prince Elliott, the ones gunning to take Rachel down... Yeah, I’ll try that next!”

Margaret thrust a fist toward the rising sun.

“Who needs you, God?! I’m not gonna lose!!!”



Rachel had just heard about Margaret’s rampage from one of her maids, who’d snuck in to report to her.

“I see. So that’s what she’s like,” Rachel remarked.

“Yes. She talks to herself a lot. She said everything that the person in charge of investigating her took three days to find out.”

“They must be kicking themselves now. If only she could have said it all sooner, it would have saved them some work.” Rachel took a sip of her tea, which had gone cold, and looked up to the roof.

“Still...”

“Yes.”

“Her idiocy could prove a pain.”



Just as she was about to head back from making her report, the maid crouched down and pulled out a throwing knife. She glared silently toward the stairs, but Rachel raised a hand to stop her.

The door opened from the other side, and a girl with a ponytail came down the stairs, her armor clanking. She was dressed like a traveling knight in simple armor and a cape.

“It’s been too long, Rachel. Sorry, I wanted to come sooner, but I was delayed! I did come straight here without dropping by the house first, though.”

“Don’t worry about it, Martina. I’m glad you came.”

The maid got the prison guard’s chair for Martina.

Rachel smiled. “Now, before we start catching up, would you care for some tea?”

32. The Girl Sells “Flowers”

Around the time of day customers started leaving the business district, people began flowing into a business district of another sort. They came to the pleasure quarter, afire with naked lust that couldn't be satisfied under the light of day.

At night, cloying voices attempted to lure customers into their establishments, and drunken men who'd lost their cool gambling and fighting stumbled about, slurring their words. Passersby jeered, as if none of it was their problem, while shady dealers ignored the ruckus and kept shouting their sales pitches. During the day, it was merely a quiet backstreet, but now it was so lawless that any person with a shred of decency would frown at it.

Amid the chaos, a small child with a voice full of innocence called out from a street corner—despite the late hour.

“Would you like a flower?” she asked.

In these streets, which were nothing but a bad influence on her, a little redheaded girl carried a basket on her elbow. Her pigtailed swayed as she desperately hawked flowers that looked like she'd picked them in the park, but no one in this marketplace of vice was interested in flowers.

This was ten years before Rachel would be thrown in prison. At just six years of age, Margaret was out selling flowers in the pleasure quarter to help make ends meet.



Margaret's mother was a high-class prostitute. She was beautiful even without makeup, and with her calm, ephemeral smile, she could have passed for a well-to-do young lady. Maybe it was because of her looks, but Margaret's mother dressed more chastely than the other gaudily dressed women around her. Next to all of the flowers with their toxic colors, her appearance might have suggested she attracted fewer clients, yet she still had any number of pollinators who wanted to bed her.

You would think that this would have been enough for her to live in luxury, since she was one of the big earners in this town, but perhaps because she was picky about her clientele, Margaret never got the sense that they were doing well financially. That was why she went out day after day to sell flowers, so that she could help her mother.

Margaret's mother was beautiful and clever, and she'd told Margaret, “You should start working now, if you're thinking about your future.”

Margaret had never thought of anything beyond tomorrow's

dinner, but if her mom said it, then she must be right.



“Would you like some flowers?”

The blooms that Margaret had picked by the roadside earlier looked, as you might expect, rather unimpressive in the gloom of night. Obviously, they weren’t selling.

Go figure. No one would pay money for these things, she thought, but every so often, someone would fall for it and give her some spare change out of the goodness of their hearts, so you never knew.

If two or three people give me pity money, then that’s enough to buy milk for tomorrow.

As she was counting her chickens before they hatched, looking around to see if anyone might stop for her, a shadow fell over Margaret.

“Hm?”

Raising her eyes, she saw a middle-aged gentleman looking down at her.

I did it! I’ve got a customer!

“Would you like a flower?”

Margaret extended some wilted blooms toward the man, but he wasn’t interested in flowers. Instead, he wrapped his hands ever so gently around the hand she was holding out.

“Mister?”

She was perplexed by his strange behavior. She didn’t know what he wanted.

The middle-aged man stroked Margaret’s hand and crouched down so he could look directly into her eyes. Seeing her adorable dubious expression up close, he nodded with satisfaction.

“You’re such a cute little girl. How much do *you* cost?”

A slimy grin on his face, he looked into Margaret’s eyes as she tilted her head in confusion.

“Huh...? Oh! Ohhh!” Finally understanding his pedophilic intentions, Margaret broke into a smile. “You’re *that* kind of customer, huh? Whew, you had me worried there! I thought I was about to get involved in an ‘incident.’”

“Huh? Uh, no, that’s exactly what this is...”

“There’s been a lot of problems lately with abductions and stuff! That’s no good, not paying a girl after you’ve bought her!”

“That’s the problem?!”

Margaret, now completely relaxed, raised her fingers to indicate the price and held them out toward him.

“Well, if *that’s* what you’re after, *this* is what it’s going to cost you.”

Margaret gave him a price that was more than enough to buy every flower in her basket three times over, yet it wasn't too much to "play" with such a pretty little girl. In fact, the man was so thrilled with the bargain that he gladly paid her fee up front.

Margaret put the payment away, giddily hugged him, and took his hand.

"Over here. Mom's got a room she uses for 'business'!"

"Oh, she does? How considerate."

They both smiled as they walked hand in hand through this hell.



Margaret led him to a building in a cramped alleyway. The door was nearly falling off, and there was so much dust that you'd think it was a storage room or a ruin. The man felt a bit apprehensive about this, but Margaret flashed him an innocent smile.

"If the front is like this, they won't come to crack down on us," she said. "The back room is nice and clean."

"Ohh. That makes sense."

Margaret let go of the man's hand and pushed on the rusty metal door, letting out a cute little groan. Once she'd gotten the door open, she went inside ahead of him.

"It's in here. Watch your step. It's dark."

"Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa."

The man entered and followed Margaret's voice until he saw a light faintly shining under a door at the back. He felt around for the knob, and as he pushed it open, it occurred to him that it was strange the door was closed if the little girl had already gone inside.

A gust of air brushed his cheek. On the other side of the door was...outside.

"Huh?"

It wasn't a guest room, as he'd expected, or any other kind of structure.

"What?!"

Unable to immediately understand what had happened, the man kept moving and tripped over something big.

"Whoa?!"

He pitched forward and fell through the doorway, plunging straight down into the filthy river far below.

"Aaaah!"

Splooooosh!

There was a terrible scream, followed by the splash of something large hitting the water. Then came the sound of a man thrashing about violently.

The lump the man had tripped over began to move.

“That’s the second guy this week.”

Margaret, who’d been curled into a ball on the floor, closed the door and hurriedly fled the ruin. She hightailed it two or three blocks, found a hole she could safely hide in, and huddled inside it. She opened the wallet she’d filched from the man’s pocket. Even in the darkness, she could see the dull shine of coins.

“Wow! What a haul!”

Margaret had quickly checked the contents of his wallet earlier, when he’d paid her up front, but now that she had it in her little hands, she found far more than what she’d guessed. It contained more silver than she’d already received and even three gold pieces. This was the most she’d made in a long time.

Margaret burst into a big smile. “Whenever I make a sale like that, all the tiredness from working goes right away!” This work was more of an emotional strain on her than a physical one, but the big thing was the stress.

Margaret counted up what was in the wallet, then headed back to the pleasure quarter.



Standing on the busiest street corner, Margaret called out to a man with a nasty-looking face.

“Boss!”

“Oh? Margaret?”

This man, the “boss” of the pickpockets and touts, was also the representative of the entire pleasure quarter. He was the judge who decided what was acceptable in this place that straddled the line between legal and illegal.

Margaret handed over the wallet she’d taken from the man to the boss.

“Just now, I got one of those customers who wanted something other than flowers...”

“Oh... Lot of them lately, huh?”

Anyone doing business in this town, even little girls, had to pay the boss his due, and the boss knew that Margaret sold rubbish flowers and tricked pedophiles out of their wallets.

Margaret dumped the contents of the wallet onto a tray, then returned most of the coins to the wallet once the boss had seen them all. She gave him the ones she hadn’t put back, the three gold ones.

“It’s supposed to be a fifty-fifty split, so your share is too small,” the boss said.

“I can’t use gold coins,” Margaret replied.

“Yeah, I guess not.”

Gold coins were so valuable that the kind of shops where common

people bought their daily necessities wouldn't take them. Later in life, Margaret would have taken half of the gold coins as well, but she was still a little too simple for that right now.

"If you want to make change for me, I'll take it," she added.

"You shoulda done that before you came here."

"I'm giving them to you because I can't. Well, make sure you work enough to pay me back the difference."

"You sure don't talk like a kid..."

Even at this age, Margaret was still Margaret.

Just to be safe, Margaret gave the boss a description of her previous customer. When guys like that finally got out of the river, they either crawled back home in low spirits or came hunting for her in a fit of rage.

"I'll keep an eye out, but you watch yourself for a while too, you hear?" the boss said.

"Sure!"

Margaret and the other denizens of the pleasure quarter paid the boss a tribute so that customers who fell for their shady dealings couldn't get back at them. So long as she paid the boss his due, even if that man returned and tried to come after her, no one would hand her over to him. The people of the quarter would all play dumb. Obviously, if she did business without paying him, he'd give her up to the pedophile instead.

For her own safety, Margaret would have to avoid working for a bit, but today's earnings were really good, so she'd be fine as far as her living expenses went. She decided she would go to the market tomorrow to buy cheese and sausages.

Staying alert to make sure she wasn't being followed, Margaret hummed a cheery tune as she ran across the pleasure quarter to the house where her mother was waiting.

Ten years later, Margaret would be a noble, if only barely, and the man she'd relied on as her boss would run errands for her rival in love. However, seeing as she was not an omniscient god, Margaret never could have imagined that at the time.



"I'm home!" Margaret called.

Their humble abode was a room on the fourth floor of a ramshackle apartment building. Many others in her mother's trade lived there as well for safety and mutual support.

Though it was the middle of the night, Margaret cheerfully greeted the residents as she headed up to the top floor. Her mother opened the door before she could even knock.

"Welcome home, Margaret. How were sales today?" her mother

asked. She was wearing a simple dress and a shawl, and she welcomed her daughter with a smile.

“Amazing!” Margaret replied merrily.

A finger flick to the head sent Margaret flying. Now on the ground, she looked up with tears in her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

“Mom, that hurt...”

“That’s no good, Margaret,” her mother said in a hushed voice.

“What do you do when I ask you how sales were?”

Realizing her mistake, Margaret lowered her voice as well. “I say they were okay and show you the number with my fingers.”

“That’s right. We can trust the neighbors, but we can’t *trust* them. We can count on them if a burglar or a crackdown comes, but when it comes to money, most of these women would disappear in the night if you trusted them with a single copper.”

Margaret sighed. “This is hard...” she replied as a sad look crossed her elegant face.

“It’s good that you’re so honest, but you’re honest to a fault, and that worries me...”

“Don’t worry, mom! They tell me dumb girls are cute!”

“See, that there. That’s what I’m worried about.”

Margaret gave her earnings to her mother, and her mother gave back three silver coins—still a hefty sum. If others were to see this amount, they would think that she’d made a good amount that day.

Margaret would use this money for her living expenses. Her mother would hide the rest so that the other residents couldn’t steal it. Margaret was still pure, in a way. She didn’t know about the unspoken rule that said if you left a large amount of money with your mother, you wouldn’t get it back, not even once you were grown.

As Margaret sipped the plum juice her mother had given her to celebrate her big catch today, she decided to ask about something that’d been bothering her.

“Hey, mom. People are always saying, ‘Your mom is so pretty that she could be making a lot more money.’ So, why is it you don’t take many customers?”

Her mother, who was savoring some distilled liquor, blushed ever so slightly as a smile came to her delicate features.

“You want to know? Mommy’s aiming for a better life, so she doesn’t want to sell herself cheap.”

“Is having customers selling yourself cheap?”

Margaret didn’t really understand, so her mother tried to explain it in a way that she could.

“Mommy’s job can make her a lot of money now, but only while she’s still young and pretty.”

“Hmm?”

“So, rather than making money only now, mommy wants a lifestyle she can keep forever. That’s why she’s working hard to catch a man with some status and income who’ll marry her.”

“I get it!” Margaret exclaimed.

“Do you?” her mother asked.

“I sort of get it...I think. But it still doesn’t make sense, so could you give me another hint?”

“That means that you don’t get it.”

Margaret’s mother was aiming to leverage her rare beauty to become the proper wife of a minor noble. She would probably have a better lifestyle if she aimed for a wealthy merchant, but to a man like that, she’d never be anything more than an easily replaced mistress. She wanted to go from a day laborer to a full-time employee, not a temporary contract worker.

She didn’t want a merchant who was rich enough to play around or a high noble who would have problems with her origins. Instead, she wanted a lesser noble. If she looked good and acted cultured, even a commoner like her could become his lawful wife.

Obviously, a noble in name only wouldn’t suffice because she’d still have to live in poverty, so she needed a noble with a proper income. She didn’t want a tyrant who’d treat her like property either, so he needed to be a mild-mannered man of character. In addition, she had no intention of abandoning Margaret, so he’d have to be so indulgent that he could love a stepchild too. It wouldn’t do to have servants around who’d look down their nose at a former prostitute, so his household had to be small. She needed a man who met all of these conditions and would swear to take her as his lawfully wedded wife—and who was enough of a playboy that he came to the pleasure quarter.

With all the things she wanted, it was no wonder there weren’t any candidates remaining. She’d yet to meet a man who was up to her standards. But Margaret’s mother wasn’t going to give up. She was still in her early twenties. She’d be able to keep looking for another decade still.

“That kind of man doesn’t want a woman who’s used to fooling around. That’s why I’m a daughter of a fallen noble, reluctantly living as a prostitute...” her mother explained.

“Huh? But weren’t your family potato farmers?” Margaret innocently asked.

“It’s a story, dear. That’s why I’m selective about my customers.”

“A story?”

As her daughter stared at her in awe, she said, “Margaret, remember this, okay? To catch a man, it’s important to have a good backstory.”

Here was a mother putting worthless knowledge into the head of her six-year-old daughter.

"It's important!" Margaret replied.

Here was a silly daughter with a worrying future just absorbing whatever she was told.

Margaret's mother patted her on the head. "Mommy promises she's going to get you a wonderful daddy, okay? And then you'll be a baron's daughter."

"I'm gonna be a noble?!"

Margaret would someday be the lowest sort of noble, but right now, she was the lowest sort of commoner. The only image she had of nobles was that they were important people. And Margaret was going to be one of them.

"If I catch a noble, you'll be able to go to the palace, you know?" Margaret's mother added. "That will make you a young lady, and you can catch a higher noble. No, you can even catch yourself a real prince."

"A prince?!" Margaret replied excitedly.

"That's right. There aren't many girls out there as cute as you, Margaret. It'll be easy."

"Oooh... Okay! I'll do my best, mom!"

"Yes, of course you will."

"Lay the foundation for my shining success story!"

"Who taught you that infuriating way of talking?"

"The old guy from the knights who came and bought Auntie Meg on the second floor was saying it."

"Knights are just the worst. They have muscles for brains. If I'm going for someone, they need to be a bureaucratic type. Anyway, Margaret, don't go calling anyone in this apartment 'auntie.' And I don't just mean Meg, okay? If they hear you, you won't be around to see the next day."

"Is it that bad?"

"It's ridiculously bad. They're all at the age where they're sensitive about that kind of thing."



"It's been ten years..."

Margaret, who'd grown into a fine young lady—at least in her own estimation—looked down from the palace terrace at the lower town where she used to live.

Her mother had lived up to her word, and four years later, she'd landed her a daddy who met all her conditions. He was so far down the aristocratic pecking order that people barely noticed him, but compared to where they lived in the slums, Margaret's current

lifestyle would have seemed forever out of reach.

Now that Margaret had come to the baronial house with her mother, she was a genuine daughter of nobility. She lived in a little house with servants and spent her days traveling to and from the palace by carriage. When she thought back to her life on the margins of society, working in the pleasure district and worrying about thieves and kidnappers, this was practically heaven. However...

“Heh heh heh. I’m almost there. Just a little further and I’ll have fully stolen Prince Elliott from that awful Rachel. I’ll be the one to sit in the crown princess’s seat!”

Margaret had no intention of stopping here. Her mother had made her a baron’s daughter, just like she’d promised.

“It all went just like mom said it would. Now that I’m a noble, I’m going to land me a real prince!”

Margaret still hadn’t forgotten the promise she’d made that day, and now she was one last push from reaching her dream.

Looking out over the town, her arms crossed and her expression displaying her indomitable spirit, Margaret began to chuckle. It gradually built from her throat until it escaped her lips, and eventually she was laughing out loud beneath the open sky.

“Heh heh heh... Hee hee, ha ha ha... Ah ha ha ha! I can do anything I set my mind to! Just you watch, Rachel! I’ll steal Prince Elliott and everything that was going to be yours away from you! Ah ha ha ha! Haaah! Ha ha ha— Haagh! Haaack! Hack! Gugh!”

At some point, Margaret laughed too hard and began coughing. Then she crouched down, hacking and retching.



At the same time, two guards were talking on the terrace.

“I thought I heard strange shouting, and yep, it’s her again.”

“What does the prince even see in her?”

“He only sees what he wants to see. I guess that’s what they mean when they say love is blind?”

“Can’t she do that stuff at home instead? Every time there’s a weird noise, we have to go investigate. I wish she’d put herself in our shoes.”

33: The Young Lady Receives a Sympathy Call from Some Old Friends

Rachel was reading in her reclining chair when people started piling in through the prison door. Her fingers twitched as she flipped the page, and she glanced toward the stone steps with obvious

caution, a feeling she rarely showed.

Her wariness came from not knowing to whom the footsteps belonged. Only a limited number of people had access to the dungeon, and she could identify them all by their footfalls and their general presence. However, the group coming now was completely unfamiliar to her.

Since her own watchers outside hadn't signaled her, the unknown guests weren't armed with anything that could hurt her. Elliott's guards weren't making a fuss either, so a person of status had gone through the appropriate channels to visit the prison. On the other hand, if it were the prime minister or some other politician coming to resolve the situation, her informants inside the government office would have told her. This wasn't an official visit by one who ostensibly held power. It was someone who merited real caution.

When Rachel saw who appeared at the bottom of the stairs...she lost interest.

Oh, it's just the losers of the battle for Prince Moron.

A young lady in a luxurious frilly dress opened hostilities by saying, "It's been too long, Lady Ferguson. Well, I suppose, given your current situation, addressing you as 'lady' might seem snide?"

The young lady was Agnes Sussex, the daughter of a marquess. She was an old acquaintance of Rachel's, and she and Rachel did not get along, of course.

Rachel ignored Agnes's greeting, but behind her indifference, she added a note to her mental database that read, "Agnes doesn't have the mental capacity to comprehend recent developments." It seemed Agnes still believed that losing Prince Elliott's affection was the same as falling out of polite society. Rachel could only laugh at their naive ineptitude for gathering information.

The other young ladies each took turns delivering superficially polite yet overtly rude greetings of their own. These were the same girls who, not so long ago, had been jealous of Rachel as Prince Elliott's fiancée and talked about her behind her back.

Rachel recalled some of the lessons her mother and father had given her, like, "These kinds of people will show up when you're engaged to the prince," and, "They're all talk. Malicious rumors are the price of fame," and, "If they're truly plotting to bring you down, strike first and crush them."

"Hm? 'Strike first and crush them'?" Rachel mused. "What were they expecting an ordinary young girl like me to do, I wonder?"

"Did you say something?!" one of them loudly asked, calling Rachel out for chuckling to herself.

"No," Rachel replied and returned to her book.

"Perhaps you simply didn't do enough to make His Highness like

you, Miss Ferguson. Well, I always did think he'd tire of you quickly, but who would have thought he'd go so far as to have you imprisoned?"

"No, no, Lady Audrey. With Miss Rachel's drab appearance, she was always going to struggle to capture His Highness's heart."

"My, how rude! But, yes, I was overlooking an obvious fact. I must be more considerate in future."

They continued to boldly insult Rachel to her face. Even if Rachel called them out on it, they would insist that their polite tones meant they weren't being rude. Then they would go telling everyone that she'd made baseless and hurtful allegations against them. Not that it'd have any effect on Rachel.



The young ladies displayed a full range of exaggerated emotions as they badmouthed Rachel. Rachel went on reading in silence as if they didn't concern her in the slightest.

The young ladies, all dressed up, were standing on a stone floor, occasionally shifting their weight from foot to foot due to their painful high heels. Rachel, dressed comfortably, was seated in an armchair, reading.

The young ladies masked their insults with elegant words and kept trying to talk to Rachel. Rachel remained absorbed in her book and replied half-heartedly, not even glancing in their direction.

Finally, one of them snapped.

"Hey! What is this?! You're sitting there in your cell, acting all self-important, barely giving us any response, while we're out here, having to stand! Do you understand the position you're in?! What is the meaning of this?! This is the reverse of how things should be!"

It seemed the others had been feeling the same way, because once one snapped at Rachel, the rest followed suit.

"Hey, how about saying something?!"

"Don't you know your place as a prisoner?!"

Rachel wasn't fussed by all this. She leisurely turned the pages of her book, waiting for the young ladies outside to wear themselves out with their complaining, then said, "You all lack discipline. I'll be done in another fifty pages, so be polite and wait until then."

"Wha?! Where does she get off saying that to us?!"

"Listen, you. What do you think will happen if you make enemies of us?!"

Rachel paid them no mind. If she wouldn't even give Prince Elliott the time of day, she certainly wasn't going to bother with these imbeciles who clung to him.

When they finally comprehended that Rachel wasn't going to look away from her book, shout as they might, their faces grew tired from wasted effort. They were forced to wait half an hour.

Once Rachel was down to only a few pages left, they began to feel a sense of relief. But then, right before their eyes...

"Hm? What led to this again?"

Rachel turned back ten pages, and the girls all silently screamed. Now it was just a matter of whether their calves, abused by their footwear, would start to cramp, or whether their tired legs would give out from under them first.

Rachel's self-proclaimed rivals became so focused on how many pages she had left that they stopped talking completely. They looked at one another in silence, waiting for Rachel to finally close the book.



Rachel laid her book on the side table and took a sip of her cold tea. Feeling refreshed, she said, "I never saw that ending coming. Reading a mystery can be nice once in a while. Yes, I do believe I'll order a few more volumes by the same author. Ah, I was feeling parched, so this tea tastes even better cold."

Grinning, Rachel set down her cup and turned to the young ladies. She noticed they were making an effort to protect their feet, which hurt from standing on the rough stone floor during their long wait.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry," Rachel said. "I should have told you all to take a seat. Please, do sit down."

"Are you joking?! Where is there anywhere to sit?!" cried one girl who was already teary-eyed from the pain.

Rachel looked at the front room, which only had the prison guard's table and chair for furniture.

"That room is not my responsibility, so please direct your complaints to Prince Elliott."

"Wh-What are you talking about?!"

"But it's not as if we're at sea. If you wanted to sit, you could've sat down anywhere, you know?"

"Wh-Why you!"

Young noblewomen, not lowly ones like Margaret, but girls of good lineages who could aim to become crown princess, would never deign to sit on the stone floor of a prison.

Amused by how vexed they were because they couldn't leave or sit, Rachel smiled and added, "Come to think of it, you were saying something before, yes? I apologize, but I was absorbed in my book and couldn't listen to what people I care so little about had to say. So, if you don't mind, could you start again from the beginning?"

"Ferguson, you...!"

If looks could kill, these young ladies would have all been very intimidating...but they couldn't, so Rachel continued, cool as a cucumber. She could kill without looks, after all.

"Now then." Rachel smiled and rubbed her hands together. "I haven't seen you all recently. I'm pleased to see you're well."

"You too. You seem energetic for someone who's been in jail for months now," remarked one of the ladies.

"Yes, I've been living a healthy lifestyle!"

Rachel's beaming smile caused the girls to falter for a moment, but only because they were startled to see her so expressive. They did not yet realize the danger they themselves were in. They only knew the Rachel that had been playing the prince's fiancée, so they'd never seen the dangerous, wild Rachel.

“Speaking of health, has yours been all right, Lady Barbara?” Rachel asked.

“Huh?” Barbara replied.

Knowing that they hadn’t grasped the meaning behind her question, Rachel put on a look of excessive concern. “I’ve heard that you’ve taken quite a liking recently to this new fried delicacy, the doughnut, and that you even enjoy them with a heaping dose of whipped cream on top. You’ve gained ten kilos in a mere two months, and your tailors are throwing a fit about how they’re unable to resize your clothing fast enough. It’s an amusing story, but when you get fat...I’m sorry, so pleasantly *plump* in such a short time, does that not put a strain on your heart? What did your doctor have to say about it at your checkup last week?”

“Wha...?!”

Barbara was well aware that she hadn’t been doing a good job of hiding it, so she went silent. However, the others, who were not yet under fire and therefore could view things with cooler heads, noticed something strange about what Rachel said.

Two months ago, Rachel had already been in prison. How did she know about a health checkup that had taken place merely a week ago, and in a private residence where the information shouldn’t have gotten out to begin with?

Looking around at each of the speechless girls, Rachel addressed her next target.

“Lady Cara.”

“Wh-What is it...?” Cara responded, obviously wary.

With a charming smile, Rachel cut straight to the chase and asked, “How did you enjoy the masquerade last week?”

Cara winced. The other young ladies began whispering suspiciously.

“Last week? Was there a masquerade last week?”

“No. I certainly never received an invitation, at least...”

Still smiling, Rachel added, “Ohh, I called it a masquerade, but it’s not the sort of thing that members of polite society would be officially invited to. It was a personal gathering, for young nobles who share certain interests...”

“Oh...”

They concluded that it must have been a dance circle, attended by a select few. They popped up from time to time. Boys and girls who were bad dancers and worried about embarrassing themselves at parties would get together to practice. That was nothing to cringe about, though.

It was time for Rachel to drop the bomb.

“One where they all dance together without any clothes on and

engage in other *fun* activities.”

The young ladies were too shocked to even gasp.

“She’s lying, okay?! I don’t know anything about that!” shouted Cara, now pale as a sheet.

The knowledge that a highborn lady like her, one who aimed to become crown princess, was a regular attendee of such a depraved social circle would be a major scandal. It would be difficult for her to marry someone of the same standing as her, let alone the prince, once it came out.

“You’re trying to bring me down, is that it?! You had your fall from grace, and now you’re trying to take me with you. You devil!”

Cara shouted at Rachel, but she was anxiously glancing at her comrades on either side of her. If they would just keep quiet, she could smooth this over. Unfortunately for her, all of them had already been trying to steal Prince Elliott from Rachel and become crown princess themselves. They were rivals, and not amicable ones. With the threat of Rachel gone, it was hard to imagine them protecting one another.

I have to deny Rachel’s allegation and feign innocence! Cara decided.

Rachel shook her head, seemingly troubled. “Oh, goodness, no. I didn’t mean it that way... I was simply curious. You were boldly declaring that you were going to be that count’s son’s first. John of the House of Taylor, right? They tell me that if you can just seduce him, his will be the fifth cherry you’ve popped and the group will grant you the title of hunter. It’s a rare honor among you aficionados, isn’t it? So isn’t it only natural for me to wonder if you’ve succeeded?”

The young ladies were speechless. Not only did Cara attend these indecent parties, but she was also so depraved that the other attendees viewed her with awe and respect! If others knew, almost no man of title would consider marrying her.

“I-I-I-It’s all a lie! The hosts are *very* careful to make sure no information gets out, okay?!”

“Oh, but I thought you had never heard of these gatherings before?” Rachel asked.

“Urkh?!”

That slip of the tongue drew everyone’s suspicious eyes toward Cara. Understanding that Rachel had just dealt her a fatal blow, Cara couldn’t muster the strength to deny it any further. Instead, she slumped to her behind on the hard stone floor.

“Moving on...” Rachel said with a smile.

The group shuddered as she began searching for her next prey. *Who is this?! they all thought. What happened to the “midday moon”?! This monster wearing the mask of a cheerful young lady chilled them to their cores.*

Still, one of them found the courage and, in a trembling voice, asked, “H-Hasn’t your personality changed a little too much?!”

Still smiling, Rachel tilted her head to the side. “Oh, I’ve always been like this. It’s simply that in my position as the prince’s fiancée, I had to prioritize being polite.”

Rachel looked at the group of awestruck girls and chuckled.

“It’s amusing, isn’t it? All the people who made light of me would happily babble on, as if I had no mouth of my own, bragging about themselves and gossiping about others. Why did you think I wouldn’t talk? Hee hee, it’s so silly.”

They all flinched, and the blood drained from each of their faces. They’d all done what Rachel had said to one degree or another. In order to demonstrate their superiority over their rivals, they’d sometimes intimidate them by bragging about their own accomplishments. And when it came to nasty rumors about the others, they were even more eager to talk.

“There are a lot of people furious that I’ve been jailed... I’m grateful to them. They’ve been going around, investigating anyone involved in the incident.”

There was no blood left in the ladies’ pale-white faces.

The first suspects concerning Rachel’s imprisonment were obviously Elliott and Margaret, but if you considered who the next most likely culprits were...

Since the girls seemed ready to faint, Rachel clapped her hands together and, with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, said, “Oh, yes! That reminds me! How are you all for time? I’d dearly love to continue this fun conversation, but you must all be so busy compared to me. If you have lessons scheduled for today, it’s a shame, but I’ll have to let you go.”

They perfectly understood what Rachel was saying. *“If you want to continue this, I’m ready to keep going until somebody hangs. But if you want to back down, I’ll let you go, okay?”*

“U-Unfortunately, I do have lessons! O-Oho ho ho ho... Good day!” Agnes said quickly. She was the first out the door.

“It’s a shame to say so, but I must be going too!”

“Toodles!”

The others all said hasty goodbyes before following Agnes out. They didn’t want to be here another second. If their name was the next out of this monster’s mouth, they would be ruined that very instant.

Working their aching legs as hard as they could, they hurried to get out of Rachel’s sight. Staggering up the steps, they reached the ground level, and...the door wouldn’t open.

“It won’t open?!” Agnes tried pushing, and she tried pulling, but

the door wouldn't budge. Some of the others tried to help, but it would only move a little, not enough to suggest they could get out.

Rachel, who'd already picked out her next book, smiled. "Oh, my... It seems you do have time after all."

"N-No! That's not it!"

"Th-The door won't open!"

"Really now. That door doesn't lock, so it should open, you know? Lady Margaret always pops in as she pleases whenever the guard isn't around."

Rachel laid down her book and straightened her chair back to its upright position. Resting an elbow on the armrest and tapping her cheek with her fingers, she crossed her legs like the demon lord of legend.

"Now then, ladies, we have a lot to talk about. Let's have a pleasant *chat* for as long as time permits."

"N-Noooooooooo!!!"



Margaret, who was resting outside the prison door, let out a sigh.

"I guess that bunch of uglies was no match for her..."

There was no one else around. The replacements for the knights standing watch outside the prison hadn't arrived when it was time for the shift change, so Margaret had offered to watch in their place for just a little while.

As she waited for her replacement, Margaret kept the door shut with a technique she'd learned living downtown. An amateur would've piled stuff up in front of the door, but the truth was you didn't need to completely cover the door to keep people in. Instead, Margaret had inconspicuously propped a few thin stone tiles against the door, fitting their corners into gaps between loose tiles in the stone floor. That was all it took. If the door was stuck at the bottom, it wouldn't open even if the remaining ninety-nine percent was unobstructed. It was like propping a bar against the door.

Of course, there was the chance that they'd be able to force it open with brute force. If it were Sykes inside, that would be one thing, but these sows couldn't do it. And if she made up some plausible excuse for their screaming, the knights who showed up for duty would never guess the door was stuck and wouldn't rescue them. When would they get out, then? That was up to their luck.

Margaret had set the young ladies on Rachel, hoping that they'd take each other out, but...

"It was totally one-sided. Looks like I'll have to get Prince Elliott and the others to do something about her after all."

Their only talent was trying to trip others up. They'd been as

useless as she'd expected. Still, Rachel likely hadn't imagined that they'd get stuck inside the prison, so those buzzing flies would serve to irritate her at least.

One of her plans had failed, but Margaret wouldn't give up. She would just have to come up with another. If someone messes with you, mess with them right back—that was her policy. More importantly, those ugly jerks were all finished now! All the harassment she'd faced had actually been from them! Good job, Rachel!

Margaret greeted the knights as they finally arrived for their shift, and then she skipped off back to the palace.

34: The Young Lady Does Nothing Because She is in Prison

Harassing Rachel had gradually become something of an extracurricular activity for Prince Elliott and his cronies. They were back at it again today, standing near the prison and getting ready for their assault.

As Elliott was giving orders, his voice full of hope that things would work out this time, Rachel poked her head out through the barred window.

"Is Sir Sykes with you?" she asked Elliott.

"Huh? Me?" Sykes walked over to the window. "What's up?"

"I thought I should apologize in advance. I'm sowwie."

"You're supposed to say that to Margaret!" Elliott interjected.

Rachel ignored Elliott and flashed Sykes a troubled smile. "You see, with the abundance of free time on my hands, I've been writing to all my friends. When Martina heard about the thing with Margaret, well..."

"Wha?! Don't tell me you told Martina about Margaret?!" Sykes cried.

Rachel stuck out her tongue and giggled cutely. "I did, and, well... She came."

Rachel started to explain that Martina had visited her the night before last, but Sykes took off running as fast as his legs would carry him.

"H-Hey, Sykes?!" stuttered one of Elliott's hangers-on.

"Sir Abigail?!" yelled another.

The rest of Elliott's entourage called after Sykes, but it was questionable whether he heard them.

Elliott, the only one aware of the situation, had turned pale. "Rachel, what have you gone and done?!"

"No, no, you misunderstand," she replied. "The main topic was about how you broke off our engagement and imprisoned me. But for

some reason, Martina reacted to the news that Sir Sykes and Margaret were getting along.”

“Yeah, of course she would! Everyone, back to the palace! Sykes is in danger!”

“Huh?”

The rest of the group, unfamiliar with the details, tilted their heads in confusion.



Lord Abigail, the commander of the knights, sat in a conference room with the other higher-ups and stroked his goatee as he listened to a report. Suddenly, hurried footsteps echoed through the hall outside. The knights, veterans that they were, could discern that, despite how loud they were, they belonged to only one person.

“What’s going on?” asked one of the captains sitting at the table. “One of you, go look.”

A younger knight standing nearby walked over to the door just in time for it to fly open and send him sprawling.

“What’s going on?!”

The knights all rose to their feet, drawing their swords as a horribly distraught Sykes entered the room.

“Sykes?” Lord Abigail questioned.

Sykes’s father looked on in disbelief as his son leveled a finger at him and roared, “Old man! Gimme money!!!”

Seeing that it was just their commander’s idiot son here to beg for pocket money, the assembled knight captains rubbed their temples in dismay.

Lord Abigail sighed, then spoke to his son on their behalf.

“Sykes, you’re almost an adult, soon to be a proper knight. Yet here you are, disrupting an official meeting to beg me for money. Let me be clear, okay?! You’re already facing criticism for failing to dissuade His Highness about Miss Ferguson! And on top of that, you’ve been fawning over his mistress, despite having a fiancée of your own! Have you no common sense?! What’s it for this time? Another present for Miss Poisson? If you’re so generous, then get something for Martina first!”

Paying no heed to his father’s lecture, Sykes snapped, “This is about Martina! She got a letter from Rachel, and now she’s here! We don’t have time for lectures, old man! I need the money to escape!”

Lord Abigail pulled his wallet out of his pocket and threw it to Sykes. Then he looked to the other commanders and instructed, “Gather the knights and prepare for armed combat! Mobilize the troops from our garrisons outside the city and deploy them as well! If she gets in close, there’ll be no stopping her! Have the soldiers bring

out the big shields we use for siege battles!”

The knights sprang into action. They shouted back and forth as they responded to the sudden crisis.

“What has our inspector in the east been doing?!” asked one knight. “He was supposed to have watchers monitoring Miss Evans, wasn’t he?!”

Another knight answered, “The cavalry company she was assigned to were watching her! That’s fourteen well-trained men!”

Lord Abigail looked at his son and pointed to the north. “Take a fast horse to the command center in Sand Valley! Borrow whatever money you need there!”

“Sorry, dad! If we both survive, let’s meet again!”

Sykes turned on his heel, ready to make himself scarce.

However...

“You know I’m here, so where are you running off to without even seeing me? Well, Sykes?”

At some point, Martina had appeared in the doorway. The incarnation of love and death stood calmly blocking the exit. After a moment, she stepped into the conference room. Her trunk was solid, so she could walk elegantly without shaking the core of her tall, slender body.

Martina had glossy, waist-length black hair, which was tied back in a ponytail, and smooth, tanned skin. There were no signs of makeup on her face, and she didn’t meet the beauty standards expected of a nobleman’s daughter, but her large eyes and thin lips projected an air of nobility. She would have looked like a fine young lady, but the pupils of her large, lightless eyes were fully dilated, and the strange bloodlust that emanated from her entire body could have made a grown man soil himself.



When the knights in the room saw Martina, they froze. She was crazy today. This was the most unhinged she'd been in the ten years since she got engaged to Sykes. The officers had confronted a number of crises like this one before, but she was so clearly deranged right now that you could hear their knees knocking together in terror.

"What were the guys in the fortress doing?" one of the officers muttered.

Martina smirked. "I was in a hurry to take off, but everyone tried to stop me, so...I used my bare fists to *persuade* about twenty of them. After that, they were all too happy to let me go. But it took time to *convince* them, and that delayed my arrival."

The conference room was silent. Because of the way she looked right now, no one was fool enough to doubt her.

While the knights held their breath, Lord Abigail raised his hand for everyone to stop.

"Martina," he said, "I know you're concerned about the rumors about Sykes, but you have sworn to serve the knights. Leaving your post to come see him causes problems."

Martina glared at the knight commander, tears in her eyes, and shrieked, "I know that, but now's not the time! Maybe a dried-up old man like you won't understand, but Sykes is cheating on me! I can't afford to waste time defending the country!"

"Please, put the country first!" Lord Abigail begged.

"No! I became a knight to protect Sykes! When I swore my oath, I said 'my beloved Sykes' instead of 'His Majesty the king'! This sword is for defending my future with Sykes! I don't give a damn about some old fart I've never even talked to!"

"That's the worst thing a knight can say!"

Ignoring all the dumbfounded old men, Martina approached Sykes.

"Sykes...what is this all about? Tell me, would you?"

"U-Um, er, uh..."

As Sykes continued to stammer, one of the captains silently signaled the others. The knights all moved as one and charged at Martina from behind.

Drawing her sword faster than the eye could see, Martina swung once to each side of her. In seconds, eight knights were lying on the ground, groaning in pain. She'd sent them flying. They were uninjured, but they were grasping their chests and thrashing around.

The officers gulped, unconsciously taking a step back.

"She swung at that speed, yet she still managed to strike them in the chest with the flat of her blade?!" one of the captains said in awe.

The men had approached her from behind, yet she'd struck

multiple people simultaneously without so much as looking. It was almost miraculous.

“Oh, she’s only this impressive when Sykes is involved.”

“No wonder they call her the Loving Berserker!”

Martina was a promising youth, but her abilities only put her among the top five knight trainees. She should have been below Sykes, who could have competed for the top spot, but whenever there was a woman around Sykes, Martina would go on these inhuman rampages.

“I thought a brief stint on the frontier would cool her head.”

“Has distance made it worse? Before this, she wouldn’t have abandoned her duties to come back...”

The knights whispered among one another, glancing at Sykes. He could feel them silently pressuring him to “just marry her already.”

Sykes, paler than he’d ever been, ranted, “D-Don’t be ridiculous! You all act like this’s got nothing to do with you. Before you go pushing this off on me, you try marrying her yourselves!”

That was when it happened.

The knights’ faces all seemed to be saying, “Oops,” and Sykes realized that he’d just said something he really shouldn’t have. He turned around hesitantly, but before Martina even entered his line of sight, he could already see the whirling, wrathful aura surrounding her. He froze, too frightened to turn his head any further.

Unlike the flaming anger that threatened to scorch him, an ice-cold whisper entered his ear. “Hey, Sykes, what is it you don’t like about me? If you have something to say, why not say it to my face? We’re close, aren’t we? I want you to be honest with me...”

Sykes resolved himself and slowly addressed his pleading fiancée. “Martina, listen—”

“No! I don’t want to hear it!”

“But I haven’t even said anything yet?!”

Before Sykes could say anything else, he took a kick in the butt. He pitched forward, fell to the floor, and rolled onto his back. He tried to crawl away, but Martina stood towering over him, her sword pointed down at him.

“I heard a strange rumor, you know? Lately, you’ve been obsessed with this little sow called Margaret. So, Sykes, let’s get married. You wouldn’t marry into a family that raises pigs, would you?”

When he saw Martina’s eyes, even a dunce like him could tell that he was in serious, serious trouble. The rumors had driven her absolutely insane.

Smiling politely in an attempt to avoid agitating her, Sykes played along and said, “O-Of course not, Martina! I—”

“Don’t you lie to me! I’ve been hearing all over how you’re

obsessed with some bitch in heat called Margaret!"

Martina straddled Sykes, grabbed him by the collar, and swung her other fist.

"Do. You. Have. Any. Idea. How. Much. I. Thought. About. You. While. I. Was. Away?!"

A wet thud punctuated every word.

"You're. The. Only. One. For. Me! Don't. Look. At. Other. Girls!"

Her pauses were getting shorter and shorter. The crowd, who could do nothing but watch, started to worry that Sykes might already have been dead.

"Only. Look. At. Me! Don't. Make. Me. Hit. You. Like. This!"

As Martina went on and on, the crowd became less worried about whether Sykes was alive and more worried about whether his head was going to stay attached to his body.

"Do you understand?! This. May. Hurt. You. But. It. Hurts. My. Heart. Even. More!"

Martina gazed up to the ceiling and wailed in despair.

Hearing the sorrow in her screams, the crowd all thought, *It's definitely hurting Sykes more*. On this, they were all in agreement.

With the same warped smile still on her face, Martina began feeling around her waist for the dagger hanging there.

"Hey, Sykes... The reason you keep betraying me is because there are other women in the world, right? I know I can't kill every woman out there, so let's go to heaven, where it'll be just the two of us, okay? Hee hee, we'll be together forever!"

While the knights argued about who should step in—no one wanted to be the first—Martina found her dagger.

"Stop! Don't fight over me!"

Another woman's voice resounded throughout the room. Every head swiveled to look at Margaret as she entered along with Elliott and his cronies.

The knights went even paler than before. *She's the last person we need here!* they thought. She would just be extra fuel for the water heater that boiled for Sykes alone!

When Lord Abigail saw Margaret, he shouted, "Run, Miss Poisson! Martina's in berserker mode! We can't stop her!"

Margaret cocked her head. "Come again?!"

Rising from Sykes's motionless form, Martina slowly stood up.

"Oh, I see. So you're the one-woman zoo. A sow, a bitch, and a vixen, all in one."

"One woman...what?! Who *are* you, lady?!"

As Margaret bravely talked back to Martina, the prince's cronies trembled. This woman was clearly not normal; she was obviously insane. Rachel, for reference, was sane but not normal.

Martina's eyes looked crazed. She picked up the sword that she'd cast aside earlier and smiled a crooked smile.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sykes's fiancée, Martina Evans."

Margaret bowed her head, not sure what to make of this. "Uh... Charmed, I'm sure?"

Martina took a step forward. "Sykes has had to go through hell because of your feminine wiles..."

No, you're the one who put him through hell, thought the knights, but they were smart enough to keep their mouths shut.

Martina didn't care what they thought. Her focus was entirely on Margaret.

With a broken smile, Martina declared, "I'll have your head!"

"Look out, Margaret!"

Sensing what was coming, Elliott tackled Margaret to the ground. Martina's sword narrowly passed over their heads. The dull point of her blade ripped out several strands of hair from Margaret's pigtails, which had fallen slower than the rest of her.

"Ow, that hurts!" Margaret cried.

"Tch! I missed!"

Margaret grasped the situation just as Martina readied her sword to strike again. The color faded from Margaret's face as she realized that Martina's blade had almost cleaved her in two.

"D-Didn't anyone ever tell you it's dangerous to swing those around?!" Margaret yelled.

"Of course. I'm swinging it to kill you." Martina adjusted her grip on the sword. "There's too many she-dogs out in the world, making eyes at Sykes. He and I are going to Heaven, where we'll live alone together in bliss."

"Huh? Uh, yeah?"

"So, to make sure you don't follow us to the same Heaven, you filthy mongrel, I'm going to mince you up and scatter you in the pigsty."

"Uh... Wait! Me?! Why?! Hold on?!"

"I won't wait!"

Martina slowly closed in. Margaret slowly backed away.

"We can talk this over!" Margaret pleaded.

"No, we can't!" Martina bellowed.

Margaret realized that Martina was totally nuts, and she turned and darted off like a hare.

Martina gave chase, but because she wasn't watching her feet, she ended up tripping as she stepped on Elliott's head.

"Bwah?!" Elliott yelped.

"Damn it!" Martina scrambled to her feet and gave the man who'd gotten in her way an extra kick.

“Gweh!”

In this ten-second delay, Margaret had gotten a fair distance away.

“You won’t escape!” Martina called. She wound back with her sword arm and began chasing after the redheaded girl with all her might.

After the two women raced out of the hall, the knights recovered from their paralysis and began giving orders to the palace guards.

Wolanski approached Elliott, who was still on the floor. “You were marvelous, Your Highness! Miss Margaret is still alive and running!”

“Y-Yeah? Ha ha, I’m glad I risked my life to protect her. But anyways, my nose won’t stop bleeding. Could someone get me some tissues?”



“Don’t run from me, you sow! I’ll mince you up finer than the meat in that thin soup they give to beggars in the slums!” Martina exclaimed.

“I won’t let you serve me up like that!” Margaret replied. “I’m worth more per kilo than that cheap pork!”

During their nonsensical exchange, Margaret kept running as though she were a sprinter.

Martina chased after her. She was wearing armor, light though it was, while swinging a sword, yet she was picking up speed.

The palace retainers ran around in confusion and terror, shocked at the destruction Martina’s blade wreaked.

Occasionally, a group of soldiers carrying large iron-bound shields would try to surround her, but Martina sent them flying into the air. Though the shields were reinforced with iron, one swing of her sword warped them.

Oh, crap. She’s gonna slice and dice me at this rate. What am I, a turnip? Margaret thought. *Hey, who’re you saying has turnip thighs?!*

This was no time to be reacting to her own jokes. She needed to find somewhere to hide before she ran out of breath, so Margaret kept deliberately running into tight places.



Grand Duke Vivaldi was showing the prime minister a jar that decorated the front hall of his guest rooms.

“I ordered this big jar from a young potter who’s popular right now. Quite impressive, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh-ho,” August replied. “I see he’s varied the thickness of the glaze, creating a nice gradation. Interesting...”

“Yes. I’m very proud of it. This piece will stand the test of time.”

Just then, a petty official from the Prime Minister's Office ran up to them looking flustered.

"Your Grace! Prime Minister! Evacuate at once! We've received word that some knave has been rampaging through the—"

Before the official could even finish his warning, the typhoon was upon them.

"Die!" Martina screamed.

"I don't wanna!" Margaret hollered.

Margaret took shelter behind the big jar, and Martina cleft it in twain with her longsword. For a moment, it looked as if it were undamaged, but then a seam appeared on the jar. As soon as it did, cracks spread along the cut, and then it burst into tiny pieces.

Once the storm blew past, the grand duke lamented to the prime minister, "I *was* sure it would stand the test of time..."



Margaret didn't know this, but Martina was famous for going on rampages when Sykes was involved. The people of the palace who did know hid in their rooms during the chase, desperately pushing against their doors to keep them shut. Margaret realized that none of them would let her in and that she couldn't rely on the occasional soldiers who showed up, so she ran desperately down the deserted corridors.

"I need to get away. Is there no way to put some distance between us?!"

"Stop! Don't run from me, you sow!"

The hate-filled shouts echoing from behind Margaret were getting closer. Unlike a vengeful spirit, Martina was corporeal, so she was all the more frightening. The pithy expression, "Flesh-and-blood humans are the scariest of all," popped into her head.

Margaret had been running for so long now that she'd lost her composure. Ahead of her, she saw a terrace at the end of a long, straight corridor. She remembered it faced a plaza with a big fountain. In other words, it went outside.

Glancing back, Margaret saw that the psycho woman behind her wasn't even slightly winded. She'd closed the initial gap by half.

Margaret made up her mind. "Screw it. I'm doing this!"

Pumping all her strength into her legs, Margaret raced out onto the terrace and vaulted off the railing. Having leapt from the second floor, she traced a parabola through the air, flying a considerable distance before landing with a big splash in the square pond around the fountain.

Margaret floated to the surface, wiped the hair plastered to her face out of her eyes, and quickly looked back up at the terrace. Martina had apparently jumped after her, but she hadn't flown nearly

as far, so she'd slammed into the cobblestones of the plaza.

"Aw, yeah!"

Even if they'd been running at the same speed, Margaret was unburdened while Martina was weighed down by armor and a sword. Martina would have needed to jump considerably harder. Margaret had only barely made it to the pond, so Martina had never stood a chance.

Margaret pulled herself up on land and watched the soldiers catch Martina with nets. Then her legs finally gave out from under her.

"Whew... I'm gonna die..." Margaret mumbled.

And there Margaret lay, sleeping spread-eagled on the ground.



Rachel closed the book she was reading and looked at the prison guard, who was sitting in the front room.

"You've been here an awfully long time today," Rachel remarked.

"Yeah... This seems like the safest place."



Some days later, Martina was sitting in Sykes's lap in one corner of the knights' office. A romantic mood hung in the air.

"Hey, Sykes, do you love me?" she asked him.

"Yes, of course."

"What kind of dress would you like for the wedding? I'm not confident, but do you think a mermaid dress would look good on me?"

"Yes, of course."

"How many children do you want? I'm thinking five."

"Yes, of course."

"Oh, Sykes, you silly. You need to tell me a number when I ask that."

"Yes, of course."

Martina was talking like they were a happy couple, but Sykes's neck was in a brace, his face was swollen, and he just kept repeating himself like a mechanical doll. If you ignored how monotone his responses were, maybe you could've imagined them as a lovey-dovey couple.

Sitting on a man's lap in public was so shameless that not even Margaret had done it, but no one in the knights' office was going to call her out for it. Actually, they were pretending not to notice. Trying to stop Martina when she was having a romantic moment with Sykes—or at least thought she was—would be tantamount to suicide. If they really wanted to die, jumping from the castle walls would be less painful.

Sykes's father, the commander of the knights, peered in through the window and muttered, "Let's hope this outburst of hers can end peacefully like this."

The other high-ranking knights whispered to one another.

"If you consider that she's choosing questions she knows will work with his broken responses, maybe she has calmed down a fair bit?"

"Uh, I dunno. She's just making him say what she wants."

"If they start fighting somehow, she'll have a relapse, and we'll be back to where we were the other day..."

The soldiers had finally caught Martina in the middle of what almost qualified as an insurrection, so it wouldn't have been strange if she'd taken Rachel's place in the dungeon. However, in light of the fact that Sykes was also somewhat at fault, they overlooked her domestic abuse.

Even so, she'd still disobeyed orders, assaulted her comrades, invaded the palace, verbally abused a superior officer, breached her oath, assaulted a prince, destroyed property, obstructed official duties, disrespected a grand duke, and attempted to assassinate a baron's daughter. It was enough to give her a short drop and a sudden stop three times over, but everyone from the grand duke to the lowest soldier wanted nothing to do with Martina when she was suffering from romance brain. Instead, her crimes were glossed over somehow, and the heads of the order of knights were asked to prevent a repeat of this affair. They were currently racking their brains for ideas.

"Let's get them away from the palace," suggested the vice-commander. "That's the best way to avoid noticeable harm. This time, we'll send Sykes with her, and she can enjoy playing at having a honeymoon somewhere remote. If she goes on a rampage there, we'll lose maybe half a fort at most."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Sykes's father sighed. "I originally sent Martina away to the frontier to wean her off her obsessive dependence on Sykes, but...at this point, having them tie the knot is also an option, I suppose."

They watched from a window as Sykes mechanically agreed to everything Martina said.

"Still, Sykes is tough," noted one of the knights. "To think he'd survive a beating like that. And remember the time he got covered in that rotten stuff from the can? He was already feeling better by the time he got out of the bath."

"It's one of his redeeming qualities," Lord Abigail said, looking at his associates. "Was Miss Ferguson involved in this incident, like we thought?"

"She admits it herself. She says she sent a letter to Martina about recent events," explained one of the knights.

“Well, if she wanted Sykes out of the picture, then sending Martina a letter about Miss Poisson would do it, yeah,” confirmed another knight.

“She’s done nothing wrong, but she’s clearly the cause of this mess,” Lord Abigail stated. He gazed up to the heavens. “If His Majesty and the others don’t return soon, I worry Miss Ferguson’s escalating harassment may turn this palace into a ruin.”

“Ha ha ha, what trick do you think she’ll pull next?”

“Don’t jinx us, okay?!” Lord Abigail hissed. “I don’t want any more of this chaos!”

Nevertheless, as long as the relationship between Prince Elliott and Miss Rachel remained as it was, there was no question that something else would happen.

Unable to imagine a future full of anything but sadness, the elite knights all slumped in despair.

Chapter 7: The Melancholy and Restless Prince

35: The Young Lady Gets a Pet

In the rear garden, an elderly man in fine clothes was walking with a younger man still in his prime. They were the grand duke and the prime minister, of course.

"I heard all about it. The potter promised to make you a new jar to replace the one that was broken the other day," Prime Minister August said.

"Yes, he was sympathetic when he heard what happened," Grand Duke Vivaldi replied. "It seems he'll be prioritizing it over his other work. I was having trouble sleeping after that, but I feel a little better about it now."

As they were talking, they came to the pond. The grand duke looked up to a tree planted close nearby.

"Oh, the fruit's ripened," he observed. The big tree was full of little red fruits the size of a child's fist. The grand duke's eyes narrowed happily at the sight of this bountiful harvest. "I planted this crab apple tree about ten years ago, here by the waterside where the birds gather, in the hopes that its fruit would bring more of them."

"Your Grace, I've heard crab apples taste awful. Do the birds eat them?" the prime minister asked.

"You're talking about the type used for pollination. All small apples are called crab apples, you see. I planted a number of representative species, and... Yes, I think they should be ready to eat this year. I can see some have been bitten already."

"Is that right? Ah! Is there something up there?"

The grand duke looked up to where the prime minister was pointing.

"Oh, what lovely white fur."

"It's a fluffy white...monkey?"

They glanced at each other, rubbed their eyes, and looked back up at the tree. At the very top, a monkey leapt from branch to branch. Soft, white fur covered almost all of its body, which was thirty centimeters long with a tail of roughly the same length. For some reason, it was carrying a little basket on its back. It would pick the sun-ripened fruit and throw them into it.

“That is a monkey...yes,” the grand duke uttered.

“It certainly is,” the prime minister replied. “I’ve never heard of a monkey appearing at the palace before.”

It had tools, so it had to be a pet. Still, someone was keeping a free-range monkey on the palace grounds.

As the monkey harvested the best fruits it could find, it nibbled away at some too. It had finished the good part of one apple and was about to throw away the core when it noticed the two of them.

The men looked into the monkey’s eyes, and the monkey looked into theirs. Then it snatched some nice-looking fruit, one after another, and threw five or six apples at the two men.

“Whoa?!”

“What?!”

Having thrown them a handful of fruit, the monkey grinned, winked, and gave them a thumbs-up. Its face seemed to say, “You’re hungry, right? Here. They’re on me, so dig in.”

With its basket now full, the monkey bounded from branch to branch as it came down from the tree.

“Oh, gosh. That monkey... He’s so manly,” Grand Duke Vivaldi mused.

“Goodness, my heart’s racing for him,” Prime Minister August murmured as if he might start swooning.

The grand duke and the prime minister watched to see where the monkey would go now that he was on the ground. He ran on all fours to the barred window Enrique had disappeared through. They heard the voice of a young lady inside the prison.

“My, Haley. You’ve picked me so many. What a good boy you are. Thank you.”

The grand duke and the prime minister looked at each other.

“He seems more reliable than Elliott, I’ll say,” the grand duke commented.

The prime minister nodded in agreement. “Miss Rachel’s caught herself a good man.”



Elliott was raging.

“Damn it! I couldn’t protect Sykes!”

Elliott’s followers were in tears as they gave a report.

“I went to see him off yesterday,” Wolanski said. “He looked soulless, like a cow that knows why it’s being sent off to market. Oh, I’m crying now...” He cast his eyes up to the ceiling, his face overcome by sadness. “If only... If only Miss Evans were flat, Sir Sykes could have been at peace.”

“No way,” one of Elliott’s hangers-on replied.

Elliott angrily pounded his desk. "This is all Rachel's fault! Calling in Martina... It's not fair! Does she realize how much damage she did to the palace and the knights? And they all act like it's *our* fault..."

They all fell silent, unable to cope with the injustice. A hanger-on who couldn't contain himself began sniffing.

During their moment of painful reflection, a chamberlain came to Elliott's office with an urgent note from the grand duke.

"What could His Grace the Grand Duke want?" a hanger-on asked.

"It's Rachel again," Elliott muttered.

"Go figure..."

When he finished reading the letter, Elliott threw it down on the desk and slapped it with his open palm. "That wretch. This time she's after the fruit in the back gardens. She's using a monkey to harvest it!"

"Come again...?"



Hearing the familiar sound of Elliott's irritated footsteps, Rachel looked up from the book she'd been reading while lying back in her reclining chair.

"Why, Your Highness! You're here awfully late," Rachel remarked.

"Because of you!" Elliott shrieked. "Hey, a prince is here to see you?! Would you get up and show me the proper respect?!"

"I'd love to, really, but I have this little guy here with me."

Rachel seemed more short of breath than usual, so Elliott peered into the prison. There, on top of Rachel's belly, was a little monkey. Using his mistress as a mattress, he mumbled comfortably in his sleep. Elliott didn't mind that part so much, though.

"You're not saying you can't pay me the proper respect because you can't wake the monkey, I hope?"

"Well, there's nothing I can do about it. For a pet owner, the pet comes before anything else," Rachel explained.

"You absolutely can do something! Don't think you're getting out of this because people in society are selfish jerks!"

"His Highness, making a cogent point? Ew, gross."

"From the sound of things, this has nothing to do with your pet, now does it?! You're trying to disrespect me!"

The monkey dozing on Rachel's tummy woke up. He stared at the unusual visitors with a sleep-addled look in his eyes.

Elliott met eyes with the monkey. "Okay, Rachel, what's the deal with him?"

"Him? He's Haley, the white-haired monkey. Haley, why don't you say hello?"

At Rachel's instruction, the monkey briefly looked to his mistress, then looked back to Elliott and raised his right hand.

"Hey."

"That's not the way, Haley. That's how you greet people we're close to."

Realizing his mistake, Haley got up, pointed his butt toward Elliott, and slapped it.

"Get lost, okay?"

"That's not right either, now is it? Look closely before you greet him."

Haley scrutinized Elliott. Then he thrust his thumbs into his ears, fanned out his wriggling fingers, and stuck out his wagging tongue.

"Dummy, dummy!"

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," Rachel apologized. "He's having trouble learning tricks, it seems."

"I understood his malicious intent!" Elliott snapped. "Is everyone involved with you, even monkeys, like this?! How are you teaching him?!"

"Slowly, with love."

"Which can't you teach, courtesy or common sense?!"

"Undeserved politeness, I suppose."

Elliott thrust a finger at the yawning monkey. "What is he doing here to begin with?!"

Rachel pressed a hand to her cheek, giggling happily. "He was lonely without me around the house, so he came to see me."

Rachel said this so matter-of-factly that Elliott paused. He glared at nothing as he mentally calculated the distance between the Ferguson estate and the palace—roughly thirty minutes by horse-drawn carriage.

"Don't lie to me!" Elliott demanded. "It's a long way from your manor! How could a monkey make it when he's never been here before?!"

The monkey pulled out a folded hand-drawn map.

"He had the maids draw him a map, and he asked for directions along the way," Rachel said.

"What are the gate guards doing?! How could they let a monkey through?!"

"They let just about everything through the gate, don't they? Ah ha ha ha ha."

"This is the palace! That's nothing to laugh off, okay?!" Elliott cleared his throat and tried to change tactics. "There was a complaint that your monkey has been picking fruit from a tree that was cultivated to feed the wild birds." He pointed at the monkey, who stared blankly back at him. "No pets in the prison. Get rid of him at once!"

"How am I supposed to release him when I can't leave myself?"

Rachel asked.

“Then have him go home on his own!”

Rachel hugged the monkey tight. “Haley, did you hear that? His Highness wants me to throw you out into town all alone. Isn’t he awful? It’s downright inhuman, isn’t it? What would he do if you got lost and died in a ditch somewhere? What will become of our country if a man like him becomes king? The nation’s future is dark indeed.”

“Ook,” Haley grunted.

Mistress and monkey hugged each other close, crying in anguish.

“He came here himself, didn’t he?!” Elliott bellowed. “He comes to the palace for the first time all alone, and I’m supposed to believe that he can’t get home?!”

“Oh, I didn’t expect this,” Rachel said, surprised. “You’ve thought it through rather logically.”

“Ook.”

“You mean those were crocodile tears...from both of you?! That’s one gifted pet you’ve got there, huh?!”

Haley walked over to Elliott, clambered up the bars, and extended his hand out to offer Elliott a crab apple.

“Hm? What’s this?” Elliott asked.

“Ook? Ook-ook.”

The monkey was saying something to Elliott, and Elliott took the little apple without meaning to.

Rachel, now looking back down to her book, translated. “You accepted it, so you’re guilty of the same crime, he says.”

“Is he really a monkey?!”

The monkey climbed up to rest on Rachel’s stomach as she reclined. He lay down using her bosom as a pillow and glanced at Elliott.

“Hm?” As Elliott watched, the monkey deliberately bounced his head off his mistress’s chest to emphasize its elasticity, then smirked. “Did he just...?” The monkey stuck his tongue out at Elliott, touching his nose with his thumb and wagging his other fingers. “Why you little...!”

Rachel looked up. “What’s the matter, Your Highness?”

“This filthy little ape is making fun of me!”

“What are you saying? He’s just a monkey.”

“Don’t give me that! He just finished setting me up as a collaborator in his crimes!”

“I was just saying that might be it. Please, use some common sense.”

“You’re not one to talk about common sense...” Elliott mumbled.

“A monkey couldn’t possibly do that,” Rachel pointed out. “I think you just have a victim complex, Your Highness.”

“Grrr! Hmph. Whatever! I’m not going to fight on the same level as a monkey!”

The monkey smirked at him again.

“Why you...”

As Elliott ground his teeth, the monkey looked behind him, seeming to have noticed something. Margaret, who’d tagged along, was standing there. The monkey’s eyes widened in surprise. He looked up at Elliott, a nasty look on his face, and covered his mouth.

“Wow, that’s what you’re into?! Gross!”

“You wretch! Get out here! I’ll kill you!” Elliott yelled.

“What are you going on about now, Your Highness?” Rachel asked.

“The filthy little ape just disrespected Margaret!”

“Huh? Me?!” Margaret interjected in surprise. She took one look at the monkey and burst into a big grin.



“Wow! What a cute monkey!” she squealed.

Hearing Margaret’s delighted voice, the monkey put on a cute face and wagged his tail.

“What are you saying this little guy did?” Margaret asked.

“Guh?!” Elliott couldn’t very well tell her the monkey was mocking her breasts. Instead he answered, “Various things not fit to be mentioned...”

“Your Highness, just how did you learn to understand that monkey in the short time we’ve been here?” asked one of Elliott’s hangers-on.

Even Elliott’s cronies were looking at him dubiously.

“No, listen...” Elliott started.

As Elliott grasped for some way to explain it, Rachel decided to kick him while he was down.

“He doesn’t speak Monkey, so he couldn’t possibly know the details. You must subconsciously think these things, so you’re reading them into what the monkey does.”

“Urgh!” Elliott gnashed his teeth, misunderstood by all.

The monkey smiled another nasty smile and thrust his thumb in and out of his fist.

“Did you do her yet? Well? Did you?”

“Damn youuu!” Elliott wailed. “I won’t let this pass! All that’s going to be left of you is a speck of rust on my saber!”

Unable to get to the monkey, Elliott whaled away at the prison’s iron bars.

“What’s wrong, Your Highness?!” asked a hanger-on.

“Pull yourself together! Calm down! Calm down, okay?!” urged another.

Yet another lamented, “If only Sykes were here now...”

Elliott’s entourage started making a big fuss, trying to figure out how to calm Elliott down now that he’d drawn his blade.

“Please, Elliott, calm down!” Margaret pleaded. She clung to Elliott as he panted. Finally, the prince managed to settle down a little. “What’s gotten into you?!”

“That filthy little ape! That filthy little ape disrespected me!” Elliott insisted.

“The monkey’s just lying there. He hasn’t really done anything.”

“He’s a tricky little rascal! He does it when you’re not looking!” Elliott looked back to Rachel, who was staring at him dubiously. The monkey was no longer on top of her. “Hm? Where did the little monkey go?!”

Elliott looked around, searching despite himself, and saw that the monkey had come over to his side of the bars. He was on the floor,

squatting as he gingerly lifted up Margaret's dress to peek underneath. When he noticed that Elliott's eyes were on him, he pointed to a nearby piece of white cloth.

"They're white, y'know?"

"They're white?!" Elliott exclaimed.

"What are white?" Margaret asked.

"Huh?! No, um..."

Margaret hadn't noticed the monkey, so Elliott struggled to answer her. How was he supposed to explain that the monkey had just told him the color of her panties?

The incredibly dodgy way Elliott was acting was hard to watch, and not just for Rachel, but for his associates as well. He could try to explain, but no one was going to believe that the monkey could express itself like a human.

Elliott was biting his lip, agonizing over what to say, when he noticed that the monkey was leaning his elbow against his lower leg.

The monkey shrugged and shook his head. *"You've got it rough, huh?"*

"And whose fault do you think that is?! You filthy little ape!"

"Eeeek?!"

As Elliott swung like mad at his own feet, Margaret screamed, and his hangers-on ran around trying to get away.

"Calm down, Your Highness!" begged a hanger-on.

"A doctor! Call for a doctor!" instructed another.

The monkey nimbly dodged Elliott's blade. It darted back into the prison and leapt onto Rachel's breast.

"Haley, are you okay?!" Rachel asked.

"Ook... Ook, ook, ook-ook... Ook? Ook, ook..."

The monkey's cute little eyes filled with tears, and he clung to Rachel's breast as he gestured at length at just how scary Elliott was.

"Oh, Haley, you poor thing," Rachel cooed. "You're so frightened. He was scary, wasn't he?"

"Ook..."

"Your Highness! Taking out your frustrations on a poor, simple monkey? You're the worst!" Rachel chided him.

"M-Me?! That filthy little ape was messing with me!" Elliott asserted.

"What can a monkey even do to you? Pull on your clothes, maybe steal your things? That's all, right? For you to draw your saber over that sort of thing is just awful!"

"She's right, Elliott! I'm with Rachel on this one," Margaret declared.

"Margaret, I—"

"Your Highness, how about you settle down?" suggested one of

the hangers-on. "Come now, we'll all go back to your office for a spot of tea."

"You guys?!" Elliott whined. No one believed him.

"Ook-ook..."

"There, there, Haley," Rachel said to comfort the monkey. "You went through a terrible fright, didn't you? Do you need to cry? It's okay. I'm with you now."

"Elliott, bullying the monkey is wrong, okay? Stop it!" Margaret demanded.

"Your Highness, your saber is a wreck," a hanger-on pointed out. "How should we explain this to your instructor?"

Even his followers were criticizing him.

Elliott met eyes with the monkey in Rachel's arms. Haley, the filthy little ape, triumphantly flashed him a villainous smile, but at an angle where no one else would see.

"I'm the one who wants to cry heeeeeere!" Elliott screamed in anguish.



When Elliott and the others returned to Elliott's office, the grand duke happened to be walking by. He stopped and asked, "Well? Did you question Miss Rachel about her monkey?"

"About that..." one of Elliott's associates started, trailing off.

The grand duke followed the man's line of sight to where an indignant Elliott was shouting, "It's not fair!"

"We never got that far..." the associate explained.

"So it would appear..." the grand duke muttered.



Rachel was feeding Haley a rare tropical banana that she'd gotten along with the monkey when they delivered her supplies yesterday.

"Here, Haley, your reward. You did well."

"Ook!"

As his mistress, Rachel knew all about Haley's true nature.



Some days later, a number of crab apples appeared on the grand duke's desk.

"Is this Your Grace's share, perhaps?" the prime minister asked. "I never would have expected an ape to pay taxes..."

"I didn't particularly want a share for myself..." the grand duke replied.

36: The Monkey Walks around the Palace

Noticing that it had gotten bright out, Haley rubbed his sleepy eyes and opened them. Light was shining into the stonework room. Morning had come.

He was about to get up when he realized that someone was gently hugging him. He looked and saw that his mistress had fallen asleep with him in her arms.

“Ook...”

“What should I do?”

He could have freed himself, but he decided to stay put until his mistress woke up. He didn’t have a packed morning or anything. Besides, he would feel sorry for this darling girl if she woke from her dreams to find herself deserted.



As Haley drifted in and out of slumber, his mistress awoke and prepared breakfast. Once he was awake, he joined her at the table.

Haley’s meals generally consisted of fresh fruit. Sometimes that included things he’d picked himself outside, and sometimes there were vegetables that could be eaten raw. Haley could eat meat and bread too without issue, but Rachel didn’t like to give him processed foods. She’d said something strange about cooked food having too much salt. He liked salty food, though.

The mistress didn’t have servants in this lone stonework room like she’d had at the manor. He missed the maids doting on him, but the upside was that he could be with his mistress all day here. That was nice in its own way.

Once they’d finished breakfast, his mistress brushed him. With that, Haley’s morning routine was complete. He’d play around by her side for a while, then, if she didn’t have anything for him to do, he’d go for a walk.

It seemed he had no chores today and no one to play with. Haley used body language to signal to his mistress that he was going out and then left through the barred ventilation window to take a walk.



Haley shouldered his basket and wandered from the rear gardens into the hallways, picking up trash as he went. The key was to do it where people would see him.

“Oh, Mr. Monkey, are you going around collecting garbage? That’s so good of you.”

“He’s so cute!”

Haley waved to the girls who cheered him on as he picked up trash. Doing it where people could see him left a good impression. It would improve his mistress's reputation, so he did this as much as he could when going out.

As he was dumping the trash he'd collected into a garbage can, the blond idiot's lackey, a chamberlain, wandered by. He was with a young maid, and they had a good vibe going. They could have started holding hands at any moment.

"Oh? If I recall correctly, isn't that monkey Lady Ferguson's pet?" asked the chamberlain.

"Huh? But she's in prison, isn't she?" the maid replied. "Why is her pet here in the palace?"

Haley was a thoughtful monkey. Even though this was the blond idiot's lackey, if Haley gave him something nice, maybe the man would be good to his mistress.

What would be best, though? He had an idea. He'd found a book behind a shelf in a room full of beds, in a building with lots of armed humans. It was in his basket right now, in fact.

"Ook."

He approached the wide-eyed man and handed it to him. He smiled too, to give a positive impression. It was important to be considerate like this.

"Huh? What's the monkey giving me?" the chamberlain asked. "Hrm. *One Hundred Ways to Drag a Simple Country Girl into Bed...* What?!"

The maid blushed. "Hold on. What kind of books are you having the monkey buy you?!"

"No! It's not like that! I'd never ask for a book like this!"

"Oh, I see. You thought I was a simple country girl that you could bed easily, did you? I was born and raised in the city, just so you know!"

"Th-That's absurd! I never asked for this book! Honest!"

"Then why did the monkey give it to you?"

"I don't know! It's really not mine!"

The girl smiled at Haley as he watched them. "Hey, Mr. Monkey. Did this guy ask you to buy him this book?"

Haley didn't know what the woman was trying to say, but she was smiling, so she must have been happy. He'd better make the man look good.

Haley smiled and nodded.

"See! I knew it! He says you asked him for it!"

"I don't know anything about it! I'm not lying! I'd never do any of the things written in this book to you, would I?!"

"Well, what then? Were you planning to pick up a real country

girl who doesn't know what's what?! You're awful!"

"I wasn't planning anything of the sort! Honest!!!"

It looked like they were fighting over the book he'd given to the man. Was it something so nice that he'd break up with her in order to have it all to himself? Maybe he should've given it to Rachel after all? Haley regretted it a little, but he wasn't going to demand it back.

He decided to hurry along and leave them to it. Still, what was that all about? Couldn't they just take turns reading it?

Haley didn't understand bibliophiles. Not that that was the issue here.



When Haley was done picking up trash, he climbed a tree full of red fruit. He'd eaten a lot, but more was ripening, so he could still pick some. He filled his basket with ripe apples, enough for himself and enough to share with others. He'd decided to share them with that elderly human male who'd looked up at him enviously the last time. He looked too old to climb himself, especially given how fat he was. And since Haley was going to be picking a lot anyway, he figured he should feed the weak too.

Once Haley had finished harvesting, he followed the overhangs of the nearby buildings on his way to the fat man's room. Rachel's mansion was pretty large, but this mansion was so large that it was hard to get around. Along the way, he came across a road that carts often used. It saw a lot of traffic, and horses frequently ran along it, so he needed to be careful crossing.

As Haley looked both ways, he spotted a rope that conveniently went from one side to the other. Perfect. He could use that to cross. Or so he thought.

When he was about half way there, Haley realized his mistake. The rope was coming loose where it was tied on the other side. It seemed the knot was loose to begin with, and the vibrations from his walking on it hadn't helped. Even Haley would be in trouble if he took a tumble from almost three stories up in the air. If he threw away his basket, he'd be able to land safely, but that would spoil all the red fruits.

Haley hesitated a moment, then dashed toward his original destination. He couldn't let himself fall, and going back would force him to find another route, so the only way was forward. Fortunately, while the knot was slackening, it hadn't come undone yet. Thanks to that, the rope didn't fall away all at once, and Haley was able to make it across just before it came completely undone.

"Ook..."

That was enough of a scare for one lifetime. From now on, he'd

check these things first.

Haley reflected on his mistake and wiped the nonexistent sweat from his brow. Then he tied the rope, which he'd just barely managed to catch, to its metal clasp once more. It'd be hard for the humans to get the rope up to this height again. With his weight, he couldn't pull it really tight, but as long as it was up here, they could fix it easily.

Satisfied that he'd done a good job, Haley headed for his destination.



“Ha ha ha! We haven't taken a long ride in a while!”

Lord Abigail, the commander of the knights, raced ahead of the group, elated to be on a horse again for the first time in far too long.

“Commander, we're still inside the palace! It's dangerous for you to go so fast!”

Unconcerned by the shouts of his bodyguard, who was desperately chasing after him, Abigail let out a raucous laugh. His son had recently caused an incident that led to his being sent away and effectively demoted, so Abigail had been feeling depressed. He hadn't been to survey the garrisons outside the city in a long time, and he hadn't ridden a horse in what felt like forever. The refreshing feeling of getting out and about had brightened the knight commander's gloomy mood right up.

“I know this palace like the back of my hand! A little galloping isn't going to cause an accident!” Abigail shouted back at his bodyguard.

While they were away from the front lines, experienced knights thought of every place as a battlefield, so the commander of the knights would know the state of the road he took to work everyday. He knew everything, even the corners where people were likely to run out into the road, so what did he have to be wary of? That was why he didn't notice the rope hanging much lower than usual this morning.

“Gwah!”

The rope, which vanished out of sight before he could identify what it was, caught the knight commander around the throat. A moment later, it tore him from his horse and left him hanging in midair.

“Commander?!” his bodyguard cried.

The rope had been hanging at the perfect height to catch the commander by the neck and swing him round and round as he flailed. The sight of it terrified his two bodyguards as they caught up to him too late.

What on earth is happening?!

They couldn't understand what they'd just witnessed. They'd never seen anything like it. Well, of course they hadn't. But as they stared in awe, they forgot to control their horses. Mere seconds later, they joined their commander.



The grand duke was looking through a pile of documents he needed to sign on his desk when the prime minister dropped in.

"I see you've received a fair deal of paperwork too, Your Grace," said the prime minister.

"Yes, it's hard work just looking through it all." The grand duke, who'd been wheezing as he worked through the documents, picked up his cold cup of tea with a look of exasperation. "With His Majesty away, all the decisions fall to me. Normally, the minor things should be sent to Elliott, but he lets the paperwork pile up, so even those minor things end up coming to me."

"The prince really is a handful. He's a grown man, yet he still shows no aptitude for work. I don't see how he can be invested as crown prince like this."

"I agree entirely. Thanks to him, I've had to approve a grant for the harvest festival, a number of business permits, and all sorts of other things that shouldn't be my job. If we let Elliott inherit the throne, who knows what will happen in the future?"

Those sorts of decisions were usually left to the bureaucrats, but they had ended up coming to the grand duke. Between the king's absence and Elliott's troubles, people didn't know where to send the paperwork.

Just then, a chamberlain rushed into the room. "I have something to report. Just now, in front of the inner gate, the knight commander and two of his knights were thrown from their horses and injured when they rode into a hanging rope!"

The grand duke and the prime minister looked at each other.

"What do they think they're doing?" the grand duke moaned. "They go down that road to work every morning. How could they get in an accident like that?"

The cause of said accident had already run away.

The grand duke continued, "He just lost his son to that madwoman too. Has the knight commander gone soft recently?"

"Riding into a rope like that due to his own incaution. What is Lord Abigail doing?" the prime minister wondered.

With deep, deep sighs, the grand duke and the prime minister rose to their feet. The knight commander, a member of the cabinet, getting into a work-related accident at the palace? The grand duke would have to inspect the scene, or he'd have trouble explaining when the

king returned.

“Why have there been so many incidents like this recently?” the grand duke asked.

“Nothing good has happened since Prince Elliott broke off his engagement,” the prime minister replied.

The pair followed the chamberlain out of the room.

A slight breeze blew into the now-vacant office. Haley pushed the window open and entered with his basket on his back. Looking around the empty room, he let out a small cry.

“Ook...”

It appeared the old man was away. Go figure. He looked dim-witted, so it probably took him a long time to gather food.

Haley climbed onto the desk like always and laid about half of his harvest there. The basket was little enough that Haley could carry it, so half of the fruit only amounted to five or six apples, but it was still enough for a meal. No, given how fat the old man was, maybe it was only a snack.

As Haley was about to leave, he noticed the papers under the apples. He knew what these half-written papers were. The mistress and her daddy were always signing them. You just signed at the bottom and they were done. And Haley could sign.

One time, when Rachel was signing a big pile of documents, he’d tried to imitate her. He’d gotten his signature to look a lot like hers too. His mistress had told him, “Don’t go signing things without permission,” but that slow old man might have trouble getting through all these.

Haley took up a pen that had been left behind and looked closely at the old man’s signature so that he could imitate it. Haley only understood letters as a series of shapes, but when he put his next to the original, they looked pretty similar.

Good.

Haley kept moving the pen, relocating the signed documents into the “finished” pile. Once he’d done four or five, he was satisfied. Now that guy would have a much easier time.

Helping was hungry work. It was time to find somewhere outside with a nice breeze to eat. Haley reshouldered his basket and went out the window.

For some reason, requests to back events like the “main street nudist parade” and the “first national gross-food competitive-eating tournament,” which the grand duke had dismissed at a glance, ended up proceeding with his permission.



A smell was coming from the first floor of the building where the

blond idiot, Elliott, lived. Haley peeked in through the window. There were a number of people in white clothes working hard with tools to make a variety of things. Haley had looked all around Rachel's house, so he knew they were making food.

"We don't have much time before His Highness's lunch break! Hurry!" yelled the head chef.

There were a number of young men following the elderly man's directions and working on a bunch of different tasks simultaneously.

One of the men brought the most delicious-looking plate to his boss and asked, "For the main dish, sausages with brown sauce, the recipe calls for liver sausage..."

"Oh, His Highness detests liver, so it's fine to substitute frankfurters."

"All right."

Hearing a woman's voice, the head chef left to deal with her. Most of the chefs left the room carrying pots and other containers as their turn came around, then the last of them headed off to the storehouse in another building to fetch some missing ingredients.

Haley's diet consisted mainly of fruits and vegetables, but monkeys are omnivores. If he could get his hands on them, Haley would happily eat steaks and sandwiches too. Recently, however, Rachel would only give him fruit, so he hadn't been getting any meat. That was why Haley was sneaking into the deserted kitchen.

Haley looked at the plate the young chef had been asking his superior about before. The weird thing shaped like a banana looked incredibly tasty. His mouth watered. He snatched up a steaming hot sausage and took a bite out of it. It tasted meatier than he'd expected. It had more flavor packed into it than a steak, but strangely, it wasn't hard at all. It wasn't half bad.

Haley got absorbed in eating the sausage, and before he knew it, both of the plated sausages were in his tummy. He tried the white mushy stuff that sat beside them as well. It tasted like potatoes mashed together with milk. It was so good he licked it up. The next thing he knew, the only things left on the plate were the sauce and a small amount of vegetables.

As Haley rubbed his full belly, he had a sudden realization. Couldn't he get in trouble for this? Even he knew stealing someone else's food was wrong, and that included the blond idiot's meals. Stealing food was something bad boss monkeys did.

Haley, uncharacteristically flustered, looked around. If he didn't do something, Rachel might scold him. He searched the work table and found a pot with a similar sauce and a pot with a white mass in it. If he dressed these up, all he needed were some of those banana-like things that had been in the center. He looked around, but there were

no bananas.

He needed to hurry before the people who made it came back. Suppressing his desire to rush, Haley opened a little door and spied a number of similar things hanging there.

Good! These would do. He felt that these were darker in color than the ones he'd eaten, but he sniffed them, and they smelled similar enough. Besides, he didn't have time.

Haley tore off two fake bananas from the hanging bundle and hurriedly put them on the plate. Yeah, they were about the same size too. He laid the blood sausages—uncooked—that he'd gotten from the cupboard beside the liver sausages—also uncooked—and ladled sauce over them.

Look, it was practically identical to before. He felt like the white mass was softer than what he'd eaten, so he dumped some of the white powder sitting next to it in and mixed until it was about the same hardness. Okay, that was that sorted too. He added the white sauce he'd thickened with lots of flour to the arrangement.

Now that the evidence had been eliminated, the monkey hid himself just as the chefs returned.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?" asked the head chef.

"The main dish seems cold for some reason?" the young chef answered.

"His Highness can't handle hot food anyway. It'll probably be fine. Now hurry up!"

"Gotcha."

Once the chefs were gone again, Haley came out from the gap in the shelves where he'd hidden.

Thank goodness. He didn't know what he'd have done if his mistress had found out.

Haley opened the door with the meat bananas and snatched a few more to throw into his basket. Now that he knew they were here, he'd come back when he wanted more.



Haley left with his souvenirs to head back to Rachel. He'd had a lot of adventures today.

As the sun shone down on the courtyard, he tottered back to the dungeon fully satisfied. He had no idea of the effect he'd had on those around him.



As Haley lay there, dozing lightly, Rachel looked around,

troubled.

“Where did he find blood sausages?” she wondered. “I don’t even have a pot to boil them.”

“Shall I bring them back with me, young mistress?” a maid asked.

“No, Haley needs to see me eating them or he won’t be satisfied. Bring a pot with you next time.”

As he sleepily listened to their conversation, Haley imagined the adventures he’d have tomorrow as he drifted off to the land of dreams.

37: The King Was Enjoying a Bath

The king waved to a messenger who was waiting nearby with his head bowed, then spun around and sat down on the temporary throne he’d had set up in a spare room. The room was luxurious for a hotel, but it was modest compared to what the king was used to.

“Oh, sorry. I’m dressed like this because I was just in the bath. You take it easy too,” the king said as he took a sip of cold tea. He was wearing only a nightgown and slippers.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The messenger, who was actually a chamberlain in this case, relaxed his posture a little and pulled out the many reports he’d brought from the palace. “Every office has made their own reports, but almost all voice concern with the job Prince Elliott has been doing in your absence. In particular, the series of events I reported to you the other day about his breaking off his engagement to Miss Rachel Ferguson...”

“If they’re all more or less the same, summarize them for me,” the king requested.

“Yes, sire!” The chamberlain closed the report. “Come back soon. That about sums it up.”

“I see.”

The king quickly downed the rest of his tea and set the cup to the side. He glanced down at all the reports spread out on the low table, a pile so big that they’d been too much for the chamberlain to carry.

“Ah, yes. I would love to return to the capital soon, but it seems my lower back still has other ideas, you see.”

“Yes, sire. I also bring word from the castle keeper, Grand Duke Vivaldi.”

“From my uncle?”

The king obviously couldn’t ask anyone to read a personal letter from a fellow royal on his behalf, so he accepted the envelope and opened it. The contents of the letter could be summed up in one line:

“My heart can’t take much more of this. Please, come back soon.”

Returning the grand duke’s letter to the envelope, the king picked up the pen and paper beside him and wrote, “I’ll do what I can.”

“Please deliver this to my uncle. I’m interested in what’s happening in the capital, but these stiff shoulders of mine just won’t get any better. I’ll contact you again when I’m able to leave.”

“Yes, sir!”



Once the messenger was gone, the king also exited the room he’d set aside for audiences and returned to his designated annex of the hotel.

“Welcome home, Your Majesty,” the queen said as he entered. She was sitting with the duke and duchess on the sofas in the reception area. All of them were wearing bathrobes. The king changed out of his nightgown and into a bathrobe too. With a look of exasperation, he plopped down on a sofa and took the large mug that one of the maids offered him.

“Ugh, they all keep saying, ‘Come back, come back.’ I keep telling them I’m here at the hot springs because my feet hurt. I couldn’t possibly make the long trip when I’m so sore, you know?”

The king, who’d worked up a sweat playing polo just the other day, knocked back his mug of Pilsner with a face that was the picture of health.

“Oh, if it’s that bad, you should really cut back on the drinking,” the queen said with a grin.

The king burped, then, with a straight face, said, “I’m drinking all this alcohol as a disinfectant, you know?”

He glanced at the table lined with dishes that had been spiced for a commoner’s palate, more intensely flavorful than anything served at the palace. He chose a bone-in chicken broiled in soy, picked it up with his bare hands, and dug in. He washed it down with a hard golden seltzer.

“When I think about how I’m not allowed to enjoy things like this in front of others anymore, it makes me wish I’d never become king.”

“It’s important to keep up appearances in our line of work,” the queen said. “It makes times like this when we can let our hair down all the more fun.”

The king licked his fingers as he flipped through the reports on the side table. “Honestly, how is it that a young lady who’s in prison can send much more detailed reports far more frequently than the government and the royal court?”

He’d quickly skimmed the mountain of reports the chamberlain had brought from the palace, just in case, but they only told him two things. The first was that Elliott was blisteringly incompetent. He was so intent on harassing Rachel in prison that he was neglecting his duties. The second, which was related to that dereliction of duty, was

that Elliott was constantly causing trouble around the palace. It wasn't exclusively Elliott, but he and his crew were always involved in one way or another. From there, the reports all concluded that there was no end in sight and begged him to come back quickly.

The king scowled as the faces of the people he'd left in charge in his absence flitted through his mind. "Can't any of them say, 'We've got things under control while you're away. Take your time and enjoy yourself?'"

"You have to admit, this is a highly irregular situation," Duke Ferguson said with a slightly pained smile. He knew both his daughter and the prince well, but he'd never considered that they might cause an uproar like this. In the case of his daughter, that was in part because he hadn't wanted to imagine the possibility.

"It's the politicians and bureaucrats' job to handle this sort of thing competently. If this continues, other countries will call our ability to rule into question," the king remarked with a villainous smile on his wizened face. It didn't look nearly as impressive as it would have if he weren't wearing a bathrobe provided by the hotel. "Besides, there's someone right here who's managing to handle the situation. Isn't that right?"

Now it was the duke's turn to scowl.

"I don't know if I'm handling it well, or if she's just toying with us." The duke glanced up at the maid who'd brought fresh drinks. "I won't ask your shadow agents to hand the reports to me directly, but could they at least leave them on the desk? Waking up to find them on my pillow is not doing my heart any favors."

Rachel's personal maid, Lisa, bowed her head. "The letter I brought you from the young mistress yesterday was the first, Master."

"Officially, yes."

It bothered him that his daughter was enjoying this too much. It also bothered him that, despite the businesslike tone they were written in, the reports were full of things that seemed crazy.

Setting down her glass, the queen passed the report she'd been looking at to the king. "Rachel really is the only one fit to be the next queen. Just look at this report. It's so detailed and concise. Compare that to the pathetic, fragmentary reports the people in the palace send us just once a week."

The duke figured that they were so detailed because she also wrote about what she was doing backstage to trip the prince up. The courtiers who were forced to watch this play from the guest seats couldn't possibly write about any of that.

"But, after seeing this, we can't very well have Rachel marry the prince. They wouldn't last a year together," said the duchess, looking more than a little intoxicated. The report she was holding covered the

incident that had gotten Sykes shipped off to the frontier.

With the cold face of a ruler, the queen poured chilled wine into the duchess's empty glass. "We'll give up on Elliott and make Raymond the crown prince instead. The members of Elliott's faction will need convincing, but after this debacle, they've likely given up already."

The king was quick to jump in and add, "I mean, Rachel probably planned for that when she caused this incident." He drained another mug, waving to Lisa for a refill. "When she gets back at Elliott, she's deliberately doing it in a way that causes collateral damage and that will keep him busy. People in the palace are all now seeing his utter ineptitude. Yes, the best way for her to avoid his taking revenge is to bring him down."

The king and queen looked at each other.

"I knew I wasn't wrong when I said I wanted Rachel to be queen," the queen bragged. "Look at how she's cleverly manipulating those more powerful than her. She analyzes everything calmly and has the ability to prepare things in advance while still keeping them secret."

The king nodded. "Yeah. I was surprised that time she pushed Elliott into the pond and threw rocks at him, but I was very impressed by the way she calmly explained her rationale without a hint of guilt. To me, his father! She was capable and bold, and she fully understood the situation. I could see she was meant to rule, not to serve."

"And the way she's masterminded an operation of this scale from prison... I'd have expected no less from her."

"She gets major points for getting her followers to stick with her when she'd essentially lost all of her power."

The more Rachel messed with Elliott, the more the royal couple trusted her. Now they were even talking about replacing the prince instead of the fiancée. Because Rachel had gone too far, it was actually going to be even harder for her to get out of it now. Lisa was amused by the irony.

When Lisa brought them fresh drinks, the king and queen had a good time smashing their mugs together.

"Prison, yay!"

The duke picked up the scattered reports from the table and handed them to Lisa. "Still, taking all of that into account, we do need to end this. We can't leave our country's center of power empty forever."

"Yeah, you have a point," the king agreed. "I suppose this relaxing hot springs trip, which has lasted for two whole months, has reached its conclusion."

The king let out a great sigh and leaned against the back of the sofa. The queen and the duchess looked at each other.

“The endless loop of eating, bathing, and sleeping...”

“The delightful commoner food that we can’t get in the palace, and the parties we can enjoy without decorum...”

“Where we don’t have to keep up appearances for polite society...”

“And there are no subordinates to get in our way, or spiteful political rivals to waste our time...”

The four of them lay down on their respective sofas.

“Ahh, I don’t want to go home...”



A maid in a black coat appeared from the darkness of the dungeon.

“Young mistress.”

Rachel, who’d been playing with Haley, looked up. “Hmm? This isn’t a report day, is it? What happened?”

The maid bowed her head and said, “We received an urgent message from Lisa at the Fracker Hot Springs. His Majesty and the master will be returning soon.”

“Hmm.” Rachel sat up and stroked her chin. “That’s the public report, right? What’s the secret one?”

“Lisa will explain more when she returns, but...their Majesties have decided to cut Prince Elliott loose and make Prince Raymond the crown prince instead.”

“Oh, my!” Rachel exclaimed, cocking her head to the side. “What could His Highness have done wrong?”

That didn’t seem to require an answer, so the maid silently ignored her mistress’s poorly feigned ignorance.

After some quiet consideration, Rachel suddenly asked, “By the way, what was Prince Raymond like again?”

“You have complete control of this situation, yet you’re missing key details because of your lack of interest, I see,” the maid answered.

“I remember he’s three years younger than Prince Elliott.”

“I’ll bring you a profile on him tomorrow.”

“What, does he have some kind of fetish you’d prefer not to speak of, then?”

“Interpret it as you like...”

Rachel lay down on her back and rolled over in bed. “Ah... My vacation’s over after just three months, huh?”

“Young mistress. For most people, if they leave their job for three months, they have to worry if it will be there for them when they come back.”

“Do they now?” Rachel rolled around, grinning.

The maid saw where this was going and decided to head it off at the pass. “In light of your future usefulness, young mistress, I do not

think you will be fired from being the duke's daughter."

Rachel hung her head in dejection. "Please, leave me some room to enjoy the fantasy, at least?"

"We would be in a difficult spot if you were to ask us to make that happen. So, no."

38: The Maid is Troubled by a Group of Supporters

Sofia and the other maids were a talented group that Rachel had trained personally. They fully understood their mistress's temperament and tastes and were ready at all times to efficiently carry out missions for her. Their colleagues in the ducal house thought they did so "effortlessly." They wouldn't deny it either. But there were some things beyond even them. They were only human, after all, and they were not Rachel.

While Rachel was sleeping her days away in the dungeon, many things happened. Her maids faced a number of difficult situations that would never become public, unbeknownst to Prince Elliott and even to Rachel herself.



Since they'd nearly finished compiling the weekly report for Rachel, Sofia and the maids were chatting over tea when another maid serving under them raced into the room.

"Miss Sofia! The president of the Black Cat Company needs you to come urgently. The vice president is here, personally, to call for you."

"Mr. Campbell does? What happened?" Sofia asked.

It went without saying that in a secret society, members from different departments were forbidden from contacting one another conspicuously. The Black Cat Company was supposed to visit the ducal house only under the guise of doing business. It was unthinkable that one of their merchants would run into the house, all out of breath.

"Well, he says there's a sudden visitor that only you can handle, Miss Sofia."

When she heard the visitor's name, Sofia uncharacteristically scowled. The other maids looked similarly dismayed.

Left with no other choice, Sofia rose to her feet. "Meia, Mimosa, come with me. And call Sylvia and Melina as well."

"Understood!"

Having chosen the members best suited to handle themselves if things got violent, Sofia boarded the carriage. The vice president, Simmons, who'd come to get her, was looking pale.

"You want me to run to Mr. Waters, have him send some people?"

Simmons asked.

Simmons was suggesting that their man in the underworld send them some gangster types, but Sofia quietly shook her head.

"It won't help. If things go south, those people will only get in the way."

"It's that bad?!"

Ignoring the now-speechless vice president, Sofia took deep breaths in and out in an attempt to calm herself. That should tell you just how unwelcome this guest was. In other words, they were Rachel's friend.



In the relaxed atmosphere of the Black Cat Company's reception room, Sofia faced down their "guest." This person was Rachel's equal, and therefore, as a mere "representative," Sofia couldn't sit on the sofa even if invited to. She stood respectfully on the other side of a low table, the four maids she'd brought with her standing at her back.

The "guest" sat at the head sofa, legs crossed, hand raised casually.

"It's been too long, Schwarze Katzen."

She was a beautiful but intimidating woman in her midtwenties, similar in type to Rachel's friend Alexandra. Her rich, wavy blonde hair came down to her waist, and her face bore sharp, provocative eyes and a soft smile. Up until this point, she'd sounded no different from the marquess's daughter, but perhaps due to their difference in rank and experience, she displayed a much higher level of charisma and intensity.

Sofia offered her a most respectful bow, as did the other four.

"It is a pleasure to see you, Your Excellency."

Her name was Grand Duchess Eliza Rosenthal. At first glance, her rank appeared to be the same as that of Haley's pet Grand Duke Vivaldi, but Eliza was sovereign of the Grand Duchy of Rosenthal, which was separated from this country by a few other minor nations. That put her on the same level as the king. She'd met Rachel at a mutual aid society meeting and was an easygoing sort who kept in regular contact with her.

The grand duchess was familiar with Sofia and spoke to her nonchalantly. She was a very cut-and-dried person, so she dropped the pleasantries and got straight to the point.

"Let's not stand on ceremony. You know what I'm here for. I hear that your prince is treating Rachel discourteously. I couldn't just sit around, so I rushed to come do something," she said with a hearty laugh.

Sofia narrowed her eyes at Eliza, who sat sipping tea.

“So, that is why you came. We appreciate the thought, but did you come all the way here openly and in *uniform*?”

The grand duchess tilted her head to the side, unsure of the meaning behind the maid’s question.

“Yes? Of course I did. I heard Rachel’s engagement was unfairly broken off, after all. These clothes pass for formal wear even in your country, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do, but I do not think people walk around town like that.”

Sofia was taking issue with the grand duchess’s clothes—an all-black dress. In other words, they were mourning clothes. It wasn’t just the grand duchess either. Four women stood behind her, all of them dressed in mourning clothes, veils included. Sofia could tell they were young and beautiful from the slight glimpses of their mouths. They were standing in a row, as if confronting Sofia and the other maids.

While they were dressed like they were in mourning, they stood with their arms crossed behind them, their feet spread at shoulder width, and their chests thrust out. They also wore sword belts with sabers hanging from them. The mourning clothes would have been strange enough to see during the day, but these women wore them like military uniforms.

Considering the possibility that they might have to fight these guests, Sofia and her maids had come armed as well. Inside the slit at Sofia’s waist, there was a long dagger hidden under her skirt.

Armed maids and mourners staring one another down in a company’s reception room? What the hell?

“Is it odd to walk around like this?” Eliza asked. “Ha ha ha, we were in a bit of a hurry. Don’t you worry about it.”

It wasn’t up to the people being looked at to decide whether the people looking at them should be concerned or not.

The grand duchess, who’d been slouching a little, sat up and leaned forward a little.

“So? When are you attacking the castle to rescue Rachel?”

She was super excited. Her nostrils were flaring, and she seemed ready to lead the charge herself. It wasn’t that she was *worried* about Rachel. No, she *trusted* her. She’d hurried so that she wasn’t late for the fun that was going to happen with Elliott.

When you’re as beautiful as her, you look presentable no matter what kind of face you make, Sofia thought inconsequentially as she offered an apologetic bow.

“We appreciate your coming, but the young mistress has ordered us to maintain the status quo for some time,” Sofia informed her.

“She has? How long is ‘some time’? Three days, maybe?”

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

The grand duchess tapped her foot impatiently. It was unbecoming for someone of her station.

“Well, do you have any idea about how long it will be, then?” Eliza asked.

“No, Your Excellency. The young mistress has not scheduled an execution for the prince, and I do not believe she—”

Before Sofia could finish explaining, the grand duchess dropped her cup.

“I can’t believe this. Not after I pushed so much work off on my retainers in a desperate attempt to make it in time for Rachel’s party!”

This broken engagement was an international nuisance.

“Sorry.”

Sofia wasn’t sorry at all, but she still bowed her head. Although they hadn’t invited Eliza, she would at least be polite.

“The young mistress knew everything in advance, and she is now enjoying a nice vacation in prison.”

Sofia explained the situation, including the fact that Rachel had let this happen and wanted to live a comfortable and self-indulgent life in the dungeon, where she wouldn’t be disturbed.

Grand Duchess Eliza stroked her chin. “Hrm, that does sound like Rachel... I guess the Young Ladies in Mourning Clothes won’t have anything to do here. And here I was thinking it was an opportunity for Rachel to become a regular member of the society.”

“Is that...a good thing?” Sofia asked.

The Young Ladies in Mourning Clothes was a secret organization formed to save those whose engagements were broken off unfairly or were attacked in the night. They helped young men and women who’d lost everything in villainous and crafty ways, providing them places to live in secret and assisting them in a wide variety of ways as they sought revenge on their atrocious exes.

It was a secret society, so the full scope of the organization wasn’t public knowledge, but the Black Cats of the Dark Night had investigated and learned that dozens of princesses and queens and hundreds of noblewomen helped manage the group due to their past experiences. Honestly, the fact that there were enough similar incidents to necessitate a society like this made Sofia question what was wrong with the world they lived in.

This was the mutual aid society that Rachel had met the grand duchess through. Rachel had approved of their goal and begun making donations a number of years ago, and they’d gotten to know each other at the regular society meetings. It seemed unlikely that it was because she had foreseen Elliott breaking off their engagement, though.

Thanks to Rachel’s charitable soul, Sofia was now having to fend

off an unwanted intervention.

“Doesn’t Rachel want to watch that idiot prince’s head fly? Whoosh! Wouldn’t that be satisfying?” Eliza asked excitedly.

When Grand Duchess Eliza Rosenthal was about the same age as Rachel was now, her ambitious fiancé, who’d been collaborating with the enemy, had stabbed her in the back during the decisive battle that would decide the fate of her country. Her loyal retainers had retrieved her from the collapsing front line, and she’d survived to massacre the traitors who’d taken over the country and restore the grand duchy. It was a rousing tale of adventure, but Sofia wished that the grand duchess wouldn’t assume that her own harsh experience applied to everyone.

“The young mistress seems to have a somewhat softer outcome in mind,” Sofia stated.

“By softer, you mean...she’s not going to make it slow? It’ll just be off with his head, like that?”

“I told you, she has no plans to execute him. Did you make it slow when you did it, Your Excellency?”

Please, spare me these overenthusiastic outsiders, Sofia thought to herself. At the rate this bloodthirsty woman was going, she was bound to crush not just Elliott and his merry band of idiots but the knights too.

“The actual beheading was over in a second, but I drew it out by taking my time and letting him beg for his life before that. Thinking back, the execution was too quick. Something to reflect on for next time.”

“I think it would be better if there was no next time.”

Eliza seemed to think the same way as the young mistress. No wonder they got along.

The grand duchess pouted like a child. “What’s the harm, beheading an idiot or two, or ten, or even twenty? Ugh, this is all too much hassle. Just kill him already. I can’t be bothered to remember his name, but that ex-fiancé of hers is absolute trash, right? Kill him good!”

“That is for the young mistress to decide. It is troubling that you would suggest it as if it were something you would do at a drunken party.”

Sofia tried to turn her down gently, but Eliza leaned in and kept going.

“If you’re short of hands, that’s fine. My people can round up that garbage prince and his people in one fell swoop! Hell, at that point, why don’t we hack up the rest of the people in the castle while we’re at it?”

“Many of our people are in the palace too, so please refrain from...

Hold on. The entire castle? Don't tell me there are more of you here?!"

Among those who knew them, the Western District were especially feared for how insane they could be in battle. When Sofia had heard that the commander of that district had brought four of her closest comrades, she'd brought four of her best with her too. But while Eliza had real combat experience, she wasn't going to idly boast that she could take the castle with four or five people.

"Of course there are," Eliza replied. She blinked as if she wanted to know why Sofia had asked something so obvious. "We didn't know how many competent people your garbage prince would have on his side, so I brought all four squads from the Nachtkampfgruppen, which I command."

"Forty people?!" Sofia exclaimed.

This was beyond insane. Eliza had seriously come prepared to crush the knights! This country had been at peace for many years, so if the knights had to defend against forty elite psychos led by the militaristic grand duchess, they didn't stand a chance. It would take a hundred of Martina at her craziest to stand up to them. Actually, they weren't that different from Martina, inside. That was why it would take so many of her to make up for the difference in experience. If the palace staff led by the prince couldn't even beat a monkey, they didn't have a prayer against these people.

As Sofia pressed a hand against her forehead, her mind racing, Meia, who had a dubious look on her face, used hand signals to get permission from Sofia before opening her mouth.

"Um, Your Excellency... You're all young women, right? Where did you find lodging for forty of you?" Meia asked.

The Young Ladies in Mourning Clothes would camp out if they had to, no doubt, but because of the origins of the group, they were largely a gathering of young noblewomen. If they were moving around in the guise of harmless civilians, they would need to stay at a reasonably large hotel. But if a group of highborn young ladies was staying at multiple hotels across the city, there would be rumors about it. Yet they hadn't picked up on any.

Meia's doubts, which were reasonable for an officer in an intelligence agency, made the grand duchess smile.

"Oh, you weren't aware?" she asked. "They're staying in the castle now as cultural ambassadors from the Kingdom of Bakura."

They're there. They're definitely there. There was a report about a rather large group of envoys staying in the castle for the next few days for cultural exchange. But come on, how could we know that a group of diplomats from a completely unrelated country were with them?

Sofia looked to see Meia, their political expert, covering her face. She and Heidi, the one in charge of the castle, would be having their

wages cut for this blunder—as would Sofia, as their supervisor.

“Didn’t you know? My vice commander is the third princess of Bakura,” Eliza boasted.

“I was unaware...” Sofia muttered.

“The members of the delegation and their attendants are all with us, so we have over a hundred fighters. With them already inside, we won’t have to break through the walls. If we launch a surprise attack, we’re sure to win.”

Prince Elliott had let his worst enemies into the castle without even realizing it.

“I’m amazed you came out of the palace in mourning clothes,” Sofia remarked.

“Obviously, we didn’t show our weapons until we got here. We told our minders that we were ‘going to a friend’s fiancé’s funeral.’ Ha ha ha, they never would have guessed it was their prince we meant.”

The grand duchess smirked, but Sofia and her people couldn’t smile at this. Rachel preferred them to take care of things quietly, so this was not amusing to them in the slightest.

Sofia cleared her throat. “Your Excellency, I regret to inform you that, at the present juncture, the young mistress is enjoying a vacation while teasing the prince and intends to drive him crazy until his father, the king, disposes of him. It will take some time to resolve, but the young mistress is not inclined to resort to force. Even if you stand by, I doubt there will be any opportunity for you to act.”

Eliza furrowed her brow. “Hmm... Can you really call being in prison a vacation?”

I don’t want her talking to me about common sense, Sofia thought, but she kept quiet.

“Anyway, I understand what Rachel plans to do, but what if he has other ideas? Stupid men hold stupid and unjustified grudges, you know? Can you be totally sure this moronic prince of yours won’t explode?”

As you might expect from someone who was a ruler and had past experience, Eliza immediately pointed out the weakness in their argument.

“In my case, I let him get away once, and it took a full two years to chase him down and capture him. Never underestimate the tenacity of human garbage. I really do think we should take out your stupid prince. Yes, let’s do that. We’ll slay him right away.”

Why had she gone crazy like this right after she got rid of him? Was the grand duchess in vacation mode too, perhaps?

“No,” Sofia replied. “For us, the young mistress’s decisions come first. We have several layers of monitoring on the knights and on the other sections of the palace, and we can step in immediately to defend

the young mistress. There is no need for concern.”

Obviously, she couldn't tell a group of outsiders that “this is Elliott and his merry band of idiots we're talking about, so we aren't worried about Rachel coming to harm.”

“Mrgh... I was so looking forward to lopping off that idiot's head,” Eliza pouted, putting the cart before the horse. Then she seemed to have a flash of insight and slapped her knee. “I know, Sofia, how about this? Why don't we save Rachel the trouble by quietly decapitating your stupid prince now? We'd be doing her a favor!”

“He visits her in prison nearly every day. She'd notice.”

“Hmm... I know! The prince is an idiot, so if the blade goes in cleanly, he might not notice his head's been cut off for two or three months!”

The grand duchess was now making arguments that made her sound even dumber than the prince.

“This is different from filleting a fish,” Sofia explained. “And even if your logic worked, what would you do if you didn't manage to cut him well?”

“Well, that would be an unfortunate accident. We all make mistakes, after all.”

“You don't even believe your own fallacious argument!”

Oh, enough of this. I want to go home...

Tired of dealing with these exhausting people, Sofia snapped, “Why are you so eager to execute the prince yourself?! Prince Elliott's fate will be decided by the young mistress. She's the one with the right to chop off his head!”

Actually, the king was the one scheduled to dispose of him.

The grand duchess pursed her shapely lips. “But I wanted to do it.”

“Acting cute will not change things.”

Sofia massaged her throbbing temples. There was no doubt about it; the grand duchess was definitely one of the young mistress's like-minded friends.

“Anyway, the plan to take revenge is already well underway! Please, go home without causing us any trouble.”

“Fine...”

“I am glad we could come to an understanding.”

“In exchange, would you mind if I decapitated that easygoing old man I saw feeding the birds?”

“Go home!”



Some days later, Sofia stumbled into Rachel's office and collapsed on one of the sofas in the reception area. Using her mistress's property

without permission like this was punishable, but today she felt like she deserved an exception.

"I'm exhausted..." Sofia moaned.

"You must be," Lisa said with a nod before preparing some tea. The sound of water pouring from teapot to cup echoed in the quiet room.

The Black Cats of the Dark Night had been working at full operational capacity, monitoring the highly dissatisfied grand duchess and her people from the moment she agreed to withdraw until the moment the cultural delegation they'd been masquerading as returned home. When one of the grand duchess's people went into town on an errand, they'd let them catch glimpses of the knights and the hoodlums The Black Cats of the Dark Night controlled in town in order to say, "We're watching your every move." They had tripled their watch on Elliott at night too.

It seemed the grand duchess had a hard time giving up. When it was dark out, women in black clothes would appear out of the shadows or on the rooftops and get into standoffs with the watchers. They both knew who the other side was, so no weapons were drawn, but it was a touch-and-go situation. The stress was getting to Meia and the other field commanders' stomachs, so they couldn't eat much. Fortunately, they all had a separate stomach for sweets, so their caloric intake still worked out just fine.

Luckily, just moments ago, Sofia had received a report from the spies tailing them, relating that the group had crossed the border. You couldn't blame Sofia for going weak with relief.

"That time there were twenty of us from each side, all on the roof above the prince's room. I was worried we would have to draw weapons any moment," Sofia said.

"When I thought that he was right beneath us, fast asleep and without a clue, even though we were in the middle of a showdown, it felt stupid to keep stopping them," Lisa complained. "Why did we have to go through so much effort to protect that blockhead?"

"It feels so contradictory."

"We do all that for him, and he's snoring through it. I'm not like the grand duchess, but even I want to tear that idiot apart."

"You said it."

Lisa set Sofia's cup down on the table and began pouring one for herself. After a sip, she let out a long sigh.

"Still, I can't help but feel the grand duchess has gotten the ends and the means backwards."

"She must still not be over what happened to her," Sofia guessed. "I am not sure that helping others vent her frustration is the best thing to do, though."

I understand how she must feel, but this doesn't involve her, so I wish she wouldn't do things that cause trouble for the people it does.

Just as Sofia, who'd been using the armrest as a pillow, was thinking of sitting up, there came the sound of indecorous footsteps running in the hallway, and then someone flung the door open. Sofia and Lisa's eyes widened as Mimosa, whose footsteps were uncharacteristically loud for her, came in.

"Miss Sofia, we have trouble!" Mimosa blurted.

"What now?" Sofia asked with a sigh.

"An international feminist organization called the Lunatic Ladies, in which the young mistress has friends, has sent their unlawful operations unit, Saint Rose, to infiltrate the capital. We believe Princess Zofie of the Kingdom of Rhodesia is commanding them."

Lisa dropped the tea cozy she'd been folding. "Princess Zofie... You mean the one who finally snapped and had her husband crucified after he constantly cheated on her, and who has been working hard for women's rights ever since?"

"Yes, her. When she heard about the 'tragedy' that's befallen our young mistress, she rounded up a group of capable people and came here personally."

Too exhausted to even sit up at this point, Sofia lay there and shouted, "For the love of God, give me a break already!!!"



Rachel was in the middle of reading when Sofia showed up to make the regularly scheduled report.

"Young mistress, I have a request for you..." she started.

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

Sofia held out what appeared to be a ticket of some sort. "You see, I was hoping we could provide more types of compensation for your subordinates."

"That sounds good to me. What's this? Massage tickets?"

"Yes. One ticket entitles us to thirty minutes of massaging you."

Rachel laid her book down on the side table and considered this for a moment.

"Massaging me, not being massaged by me?"

"Correct. Have no worries. This will be limited to the women working in the manor."

"I understand that, but...they want to massage *me* in order to relax?"

"Of course." Sofia raised both her hands and wiggled her fingers.

"I will massage you with all my might to relieve stress."

Seeing that Rachel had gone silent, Sofia kept on pressing the issue, her face even more expressionless than usual.

“Thanks to your *far too many* friends, we have been dealing with all sorts of stressors lately. When this incident is over and you are able to return, we would very much appreciate your help in resolving that stress.”

“Can we do something else?” Rachel asked hesitantly.

“I have already begun distributing the tickets based on performance. Everyone is really looking forward to it.”

“This isn’t a request, is it? We’re already past the point of me being able to refuse, aren’t we?”

“I’m especially looking forward to it,” Sofia said with a dreamy sigh. “Incidentally, I already have thirty tickets saved up myself.”

Sofia, who was known for her poker face, cracked a grin. Rachel couldn’t help but grin too. Neither was smiling with their eyes.

“Oh, I’m starting to want to stay in here forever.”

As Rachel tried to hide, Sofia smiled broadly. “No, no, we could never let our precious young mistress stay buried in a dungeon like this! We will work ourselves to the bone to have you out as soon as possible. I *really* am looking forward to it, you know?”

“Sofia, you flatterer. Hee hee.”

“It’s only natural. Hee hee hee.”

The all-too-similar master and servant smiled at each other from opposite sides of the metal bars.

39: The Young Lady Hosts a Fun Party

Prince Elliott set his teacup down and gazed up at the ceiling as he rested his head in his hand.

“I’ve given it some thought,” he said, “and have come up with a way to beat Rachel. What would you say to teaming up with the young ladies who were against her? I’ve heard that women are supposedly much better at belittling people and crushing them emotionally.”

The hangers-on who were joining him for tea all fell silent. Then, after a brief pause, they flipped out.

“His Highness said something reasonable?!”

“He’s able to think so deeply?!”

“What was that?! Is that how you people see me?!” Elliott yelled, raging at his cronies for looking down on him.

If George were here, I wouldn’t have had to do that myself, he thought, nearly crying.

As Wolanski watched Elliott shouting at his followers, he thought, *Wait? This only just occurred to him?* But that was neither here nor there.

Elliott immediately got to work assembling a list of the young

ladies who'd insisted he choose them over Rachel, along with young ladies from families who were rivals of the House of Ferguson. There were nearly thirty of them in total.

"Okay! With this many young ladies coming after her, Rachel will be at her wit's end. Heh heh... All right! Now go around and talk to them at once!" Elliott instructed.

"Yes, sir!"

Seeing the men all so eager to do the prince's bidding, Margaret hesitantly said, "Um... Maybe you shouldn't..."

"Ha ha ha! You're so kind, Margaret! But Rachel's had her way for too long. We need to hit her good and hard now, or things will only get worse!"

"I do agree about that..."

Elliott was so motivated that Margaret couldn't bring herself to say any more. It's not like she could have told him, "I already tried that and ruined half of them. Tee hee."



Elliott's followers did as they were told and promptly returned.

"Your Highness," began one of the hangers-on, "we went around asking the young ladies, but for some reason, all the ones who'd been trying to steal you from Miss Rachel have shut themselves away in their houses."

"What? Why?" Elliott asked. "They used to always look for any excuse to sell me on why I should choose them instead."

The cause was standing right next to him.

"And as for the ones in opposing factions," continued the hanger-on, "it seems they're all here in the palace today for a tea party of some sort."

"Huh?" Elliott tilted his head to the side. The palace was a big place, but if there was an event like that going on, he'd have surely heard about it.

Where could they hold a party in the palace that I wouldn't hear—

Before Elliott even finished his thought, he remembered that all the recent craziness had been centered around one place in particular.



Elliott raced to the dungeon and found the prison guard sitting at a table set up outside the door. When Elliott saw that he was wearing a necktie with his usual squalid work clothes, he immediately knew what was going on.

"Your Highness," the prison guard greeted him.

"What is it today?!" Elliott snapped.

The guard, who looked like he was desperately trying to flee from reality, showed Elliott a pamphlet. "Visitation today is by invite only," he informed the prince. "Please present your advance tickets."

"Who sells advance tickets for visiting a prisoner?!" Elliott asked.

"'Today is a day to have fun and express sympathy.' Erm, let's see. 'On this day, first-rate entertainers in the capital will be putting on a show for the benefit of poor Rachel Ferguson, an innocent imprisoned for a crime she did not commit.' At least I think that's how it goes? Sorry, I can't read."

"Why are you letting her boss you into playing receptionist like this?!"

"Uh, yeah. It just feels pointless to fight back against her lately..."

"The prisoner has trained the guard?!" Elliott cried in disbelief. He shoved the guard aside and reached for the door.

"Ah! Your Highness, you can't go in there without a ticket!"

"Ugh, step aside! Remember your job!"

Elliott led the way as everyone headed down to the dungeon. Curtains were hung at the bottom of the stairs to create a green room, and in front of them was a small stage where a magician was performing.

"And if I knock on the box... Ta-da! Haley was in the drawer over there, but now he's here!"

Rachel's pet monkey was acting as his assistant for some reason.

The magician removed his silk hat and theatrically bowed during the applause. Then he launched into an explanation of his next trick. He seemed to be experienced, not just one of the ducal house's servants in a new guise.

Wolanski clapped excitedly. "Oh, that's James Matisse, the popular performer from the Central Circus! Incredible. I've never seen him perform at a private residence before."

"This isn't a private residence, though?!" Elliott screeched.

The guest seats were packed tight with young noblewomen. They sat in groups at tables, like they were at a tea party, but they were all facing forward, making it clear what the main attraction was. The many attendees included more than just the high-ranking ones that Elliott and his followers had been searching for. There were easily more than forty people in the audience.

Elliott was upset that they were still watching the stage with rapt attention even after he and his entourage had arrived.

"H-Hey... They seem strangely into this..." he muttered.

"Your Highness, the young ladies here are of such high status that they've never been able to go for a walk through town," a hanger-on explained. "They may have been to the opera, but their parents would never let them watch street performers and other entertainment for

the masses.”

“*That’s* what has them so overexcited?!”

Elliott didn’t have time to worry about that. He cut across the stage, ignoring the intense booing he received.

“Hey, Rachel, I don’t recall giving you permission to put on a show here!” he hollered.

Rachel gave him a look of shock, as if she hadn’t been expecting to hear that.

“My, Your Highness, I’m not hosting a show.”

“What do you call this, then?!”

“Well, you see...” Rachel began, chuckling as if she’d done nothing wrong, “some friends came to visit while I was receiving a sympathy call.”

“How can you tell such easily disprovable lies?! I heard you made pamphlets, and even sold advance tickets!”

“Oh dear. Did I get things backward? Well, it’s of little concern.”

“What about this event is little?!”

While Elliott interrogated Rachel, the magician said to Wolanski, “Excuse me, sirs, could you keep your voices down during the performance?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Wolanski whispered.

“Don’t you tell us to be quiet!” Elliott boomed. “This show is over! Over! Pack your bags and get out! And you, don’t apologize to him!”

As Elliott chased off the magician, the young ladies in the audience harshly criticized him.

“This is tyranny!”

“I’ve been looking forward to this so much I couldn’t sleep all week!”

“Shut up! How dare you go along with Rachel’s plan like this!” Elliott shouted back at the protesting young ladies, completely forgetting that he’d originally been planning to use them to counter Rachel.

Suddenly, the curtains behind the magician moved, and a middle-aged man popped his head out.

“Oh? Am I on already?”

“Huh? John Smith, the comedian? The one everyone says is an absolute god when it comes to impressions and song parodies?! I want to watch him too!” Wolanski cheered.

“Thank you!” the comedian replied.

“No! You’re not performing either!” Elliott declared. “Wolanski, what did you even come here for?!”



Elliott was forced to drive out the performers on his own because

his followers were useless.

As everyone was leaving, two young ladies confronted Elliott.

"Your Highness, why are you making such a fuss during a fun party?!"

"That's right! We've all been counting down the days until this!"

"Urgh, the daughters of Duke Gordon and Marquess Taft," Elliott griped.

Their fathers both belonged to factions that opposed the House of Ferguson, so Elliott couldn't just order them around. He sighed, loath to deal with such troublesome opponents, but he was resolute about shutting down Rachel's plan.

"This is a prison! Rachel is in here until she learns her lesson! Letting her host a show like this would be—"

"We don't care one whit about that!" Duke Gordon's daughter exclaimed.

"No, we don't," echoed Marquess Taft's daughter. "Enough talk! Remove yourself at once!"

"Wh-What?!"

Cut off before he could even finish, Elliott blinked repeatedly as the young ladies began forcefully ejecting him from the dungeon.

"Leave, quickly!"

"Yes, do! If the schedule is pushed back any further, Adam Stewart's time will be cut short!"

"Huh?!"

Every one of the young ladies rose to their feet when Catherine Taft said that.

"Really, Lady Catherine?!" one of the young ladies asked in a panic.

"Hurry up, Your Highness! You need to leave!" demanded another.

"If you cut into Adam's time, consider yourself a dead man!"

"Get out!"

"Don't get in the way!"

"Whaaa?!" Elliott backed away, overwhelmed by the intensity of the mob.

"*Th-The* Adam?!" Margaret said, breathless. "Wow! I can see him?! In the flesh?!"

"Margaret?!"

It wounded Elliott to see the woman he loved so into this Adam fellow.

"H-Hey, who is this Adam that's making them go crazy like this?" Elliott whispered to Wolanski. His other followers wanted to know too.

"He is an intensely popular actor at the central theater. His cruelly

beautiful face and slim, muscular body ooze sexiness. Every woman in the capital has their eyes on him.”

“Huh? What is an actor going to do on a small stage like this?” Elliott asked, confused.

Though he’d asked Wolanski for more information, it was Duke Gordon’s daughter who urgently explained. “Word is, Adam will be putting on a special strip show!”

“Huh?” Elliott felt like he was hearing words from another dimension. “A male...stripper?”

Duke Gordon’s daughter added, “I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t compare this to the kind of vulgar displays that you men want to see! He never takes that last strip of clothing off! But we’ll still be able to see his sculpted form and admire it up close! Every woman here today has spent her nights dreaming of tucking a neatly folded bill into his swim briefs!”

“Whuh...?” None of this made sense to Elliott.

Nostrils flaring, Margaret interjected, “Being an actor isn’t stable work, so a lot of them take on nobles or other wealthy people as patrons! But Adam is incredibly popular, so he doesn’t sully himself by becoming a kept man or even by doing private performances! If Rachel is able to call him to her house and even get him to perform a strip show, then her connections must be incredible!”

“I-Is that how it is...?” Elliott stuttered. He didn’t really understand this world, but he knew now why all the women in the front had such bloodshot eyes.

Damn Rachel. It isn’t fair of her to use money to get a popular actor to help her win over the opposing factions!

“Now, listen here, ladies...” Elliott began, attempting to reason with them.

“Get out!”

“We didn’t pay to see your mug!”

“Adam!”

Elliott was crushed. “Wh-What’s with them...?”

“They must be so worked up that they don’t know who they’re talking to...or what this could mean for their houses, or any of that,” Wolanski guessed.

“D-Damn it all...”

If he was going to punish them, he’d have to reprimand all of their houses. But there were so many that he wasn’t convinced he could identify who everyone was and whose daughters they were. And if the reason for his reprimand was that they were so obsessed with a stripper that they ignored the prince... Well, he couldn’t bring that to the king.

Unfortunately for him, that wasn’t the worst of it.

"I wanna see him! I wanna see Adam!" Margaret shrieked.

"Margaret?!"

Even Margaret was champing at the bit. That wasn't the end of it, though.

"Hey, you!" called Duke Gordon's daughter. "We'll not let you get away with watching for free!"

"No, we'll not!" added Marquess Taft's daughter. "It wasn't easy for us to get our hands on tickets!"

"No fair..." Margaret objected.

The young ladies pushed Margaret, who hadn't bought an advance ticket, out of the dungeon.

"Please! Let me in too!" she pleaded.

"No!"

But Margaret kept struggling, unwilling to give up.

"M-Margaret. You really don't need to watch..." Elliott said, trying to take her away so she didn't embarrass herself further.

Just then, the angel of salvation—Rachel—arrived to address the crowd.

"Now, now, everyone. I'm sure Miss Margaret wants to see Adam too."

"Yes! I do! I really do!" Margaret exclaimed.

"C-Come on, Margaret..." Elliott whispered.

Rachel pointed to the one empty seat in the house. "I kept a seat open, just in case something happened. I'll give it to Miss Margaret."

Margaret gasped. "You mean it?!"

"Hey! Margaret?!" Elliott yelled.

Rachel nodded with the smile of a saint. "Yes. Adam's smile would take any girl's heart away. Now, Margaret, our sister in love, take your seat."

"Thank you!" Margaret screamed.

"Margareet?!"

Margaret gleefully sat down, not even hearing Elliott's protests.

Rachel extended her hand to Margaret, dropping two gold coins into Margaret's palm.

"And I'll leave these with you."

"Whuh? Gold coins?"

Knowing that all the other young ladies' ears would be perking up, Rachel lowered her voice and explained in a whisper, "Adam's wearing stretchy swim briefs. Normally, you'd tuck a bill into them...but what would happen if you were to put in something harder, like, say, a heavy gold coin, instead?"

"What would happen?" Margaret asked.

"Heavy gold coins in his stretchy briefs... It will be something *incredible*."

“Something *incredible*?!”

The rest of the young ladies got very excited.

“I never thought of that!”

“That’s...amazing!”

“Y-You people...” Elliott muttered, exasperated.

Margaret knelt reverently before Rachel and accepted the gold coins.



“H-Hey, Margaret?” Elliott said, trying to get her attention.

“God...” murmured Margaret.

“God?”

“There is a god, down here in this dungeon!”

“Margaret?!”

Elliott tried raising his voice to regain control of the situation.

“All right, enough is enough, ladies!”

But just as he did, a beautiful young man, a hunk of muscle forced into a tuxedo, emerged from the curtains.

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Elliott’s voice was obliterated by the delighted squeals of young women.

The young dandy, all too used to handling screaming girls, blew them a well-practiced kiss and shot them an enticing smile.

“Hi there, you adorable little kitties. The show’s about to get started, so wait just a little longer, m’kay?”

“Hey, you there!” Elliott called.

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Elliott tried to stop Adam What’s-his-name, but he was buried under a tidal wave of squeals and shrieks from behind him. He could try to tell them off all he wanted, but now that the young ladies had seen Adam, in the flesh, they didn’t even register Elliott’s existence.

“If you don’t cut this out at once, I’ll—!”

“Adam! Adam! Adam!”

“Hey, listen to me!”

“Adam! Adam! Adam!”



When Elliott and his followers emerged from the dungeon, utterly exhausted, the prison guard greeted them.

“What happened?” the guard asked.

“Well, you see, His Highness...” a hanger-on began.

Elliott was crawling on the floor, bawling his eyes out in frustration.

“Damn it... I’m a pretty boy too,” he moaned between hiccups.

“They were always fussing over me in the palace... What’s that actor doing in my territory?”

“He lost in a battle between hot men,” the hanger-on finished.

“That wasn’t what it was!” Elliott protested.

“Ah, guess he picked a fight with the wrong guy, then,” the prison guard remarked.

“I’m pretty amazing myself, you know!”

“I thought you said it wasn’t that kind of battle?” the hanger-on

asked.

“That’s right!”

As things got further and further off track, the prison guard held out the money box.

“Sorry, Your Highness. I’ve got a job to do here. You were watching, so you gotta pay.”

“You said there were no day-of tickets, didn’t you?!”

“You’re letting him get you off track again, Your Highness.”

40: The Pervert Drinks with a Monkey

“Damn you, Rachel! You’ll pay for this!”

Elliott was extremely upset.

Turning back, he yelled at one of his followers, a count’s son, asking, “How is Margaret’s condition?!”

“Not good,” the young man said, shaking his head. “Her symptoms are still severe.”

“Damn her! Why, that devil; I’ll wring her goddamn neck! How dare she do this to Margaret! Damn it all! Is there no way to quickly rid myself of that plague demon?! Grrrr! I wish I could set fire to the dungeon and burn her!”

Elliott screamed until he slumped over. Meanwhile, behind him...

“Mweh heh heh heh... Adam’s marvelous pecs... They’re incredible...”

Margaret, who’d had a very good time at Rachel’s tea party, was drooling as her mind wandered around in fantasyland. Three days had passed, and her soul still hadn’t returned to her body.

The count’s son looked grim as he said, “We have to consider the worst-case scenario. It’s possible she might become an Adam Stewart fangirl.”

“Wha?! P-Please, spare me that, at least! Damn it! Why are there no doctors for this kind of illness?!”

As his hangers-on watched Elliott shout and lash out at the furniture, they whispered among themselves.

“If this keeps up, he might really torch the dungeon sometime this afternoon.”

“Yeah, but he’ll make us do the actual work, won’t he?”

“Of course he will. I don’t know that I want to murder someone over a little harassment, though.”

“Is there any way we can take his mind off it?”

Elliott’s associates quietly discussed what to do, without his noticing, and came up with a plan.

“Yeah, let’s go with that.”

“It’ll work, and it should let him blow off enough steam.”

“All right,” Wolanski said with a nod.

With their little meeting finished, Wolanski raised his hand as the representative of the group.

“Your Highness, a moment, if I may?”

“What?!” Elliott growled.

“Why don’t we do something to punish Miss Rachel for her arrogance?”

“Oh? Like what?”

Wolanski explained their plan while trying to calm Elliott’s nerves. The other boys were relieved to see that Elliott gradually came around to the idea, and they glanced at one another knowingly.

“Okay, let’s do it!” Elliott roared to rally the troops. “We act tonight! Get ready!”

“Yes, sir!”

In all their haste, no one noticed the small object hanging on to the curtain flapping in the wind.



“Ook!”

“Welcome home, Haley. Where were you off playing today?” Rachel asked as she softly embraced her pet monkey once he returned through the barred window.

After she gave him a thorough brushing, Haley jumped over to Rachel’s side table, satisfied. “Oook, ook, ook?” He pointed to his temple and made a circling motion with his index finger, then formed his hand into a fist and mimicked an explosion.

“Oh, you went to see Prince Elliott?”

Haley picked up a nearby pen and grabbed the butt end of it. Then, with his other hand, he imitated striking a match and setting the other end of the pen on fire.

“Hmm, is he planning to bring fireworks and throw them in here?”

Haley nodded.

Rachel hugged Haley tight, stroking his little head. “Thank you, Haley. Now I can do something about it. Could I ask you to run over to the watchers?”

“Ook!”



Late at night, a group of men crept through the building that housed the dungeon.

“It looks like the lights are out,” Elliott whispered.

“Yeah,” Wolanski whispered back. “She’s gone to sleep. Perfect.”

Elliott and his associates fanned out as they approached the barred window, gently laying down the candlesticks and the newly bought packages they'd brought.

Of the toys available to them, one in particular was quite useful at times like this—the firework. When lit, they shot out of a tube and burst with a loud noise. It was like they'd been purposely designed for firing into Rachel's cell. If they were larger, they'd probably be weapons, but at this size, they couldn't do more than startle her with their noise. And that was exactly what they wanted to do today.

"Heh heh heh... I can see her panicking already. All right, open fire!" Elliott commanded.

"Yes, sir!"

They tore open the many bags of fireworks they'd bought, but just as they were about to light the first one...

Fwoosh!

There was a faint popping sound from inside the window, and a firework, the same kind they'd bought, flew out at them. And it wasn't just one either.

"Whoa?!"

"What?!"

The fireworks landed among them and started going off. Elliott and his associates were spread out around the window, so the person inside the dungeon could fire at random and still hit some of them.

"Damn it! She struck first!"

"How can Miss Rachel fire so many?!"

Elliott ordered seven or eight guys to fire, but because of their wobbly trajectory, their shots rarely reached the barred window. Most flew off in the wrong direction.

"Why?!"

"This isn't working at all!"

Things had not gone to plan, and now Elliott and his cronies were in a state of total confusion.

"This is rather amusing, you know?" Rachel said gleefully.

Rachel was lighting a series of fireworks she'd set up in advance on a piece of corrugated sheet metal. Once ignited, they traveled along the grooves of the sheet and then flew off on their own. She was landing hits much more often than Elliott and the boys, who had no experience with fireworks and were lighting and releasing them by hand.

"Ook!"

Next to Rachel, Haley happily set up the next sheet.

"Would you say it's about time for our special fireworks?" Rachel asked.

“Ook!”

“Calm down!” Elliott shouted. “There’s only one of her! If we all aim together, we can win by sheer force of numbers!”

Crackle-crackle-crackle! Boom!

Another firework went off.

“What?!”

“Hey! That one was louder than the others!”

In the middle of all the incoming fire, a baron’s son dressed as a knight in training was able to make out what it was from its silhouette.

“She’s bundled the rockets together! I see three, no, four of them tied together, and there’s firecrackers on top!”

“You can do that?!” Elliott asked in disbelief.

While the fireworks weren’t that powerful, they’d still scare you for a second if they went off right beside you. And the fireworks coming toward them were louder and more explosive than theirs.

It was seven against one, and the guys were in the process of losing. But before they could gain the advantage, the next tragedy struck.

“Huh?”

When one of them reached for his next firework, he cocked his head and stared confusedly at the spot where his fireworks should’ve been. He looked around and saw the monkey with several bags of fireworks, and he was tying all of their fuses together.

“Ah! Hey, wait! If you light them like that...!”

As the monkey jumped away, the fireworks went off at random.

“Aaah!”

“Run away!”

They ran pell-mell from the exploding fireworks. The monkey lit firecracker after firecracker to feed the chaos, throwing them wherever the boys clumped together.

When it finally grew quiet and Elliott sat down, exhausted, the greatest tragedy of the night occurred. A figure suddenly appeared next to him.

“Hm?”

When he looked up, he saw the chief lady-in-waiting.

“Your Highness, it seems that all my scolding the other day simply went in one ear and out the other.”

“Uh, no...” Elliott mumbled.

“Shall we discuss this in your office? Or perhaps you’d prefer to get down on your knees and apologize to the night workers in the front hallway?”

“In my office, please...”



“That was awful...” Elliott whimpered.

After the chief lady-in-waiting gave him the tongue-lashing of his life, Elliott castigated his own guys for their ill-conceived plan, then dragged himself back to his room. He was an emotional wreck, and he just wanted to pass out—to collapse into bed without another thought. He took his coat off in the living room and opened the door to the bedroom with every intention of falling into bed with his shirt still on. Unfortunately, that was when the final tragedy of the night came for him.

When Elliott opened the door, the monkey was there.

“Huh?”

No doubt about it; there was a monkey in his bedroom. It looked at him, equally as shocked to see Elliott as Elliott was to see him.

“Huh? You! Wait! What’s that?!”

The monkey was holding a torch. It threw it at Elliott and dashed past him.

Elliott flinched. “Damn it! Guards! We have a monkey arsonist!”

Elliott wasn’t sure that the words coming out of his mouth made sense, but it was the only thing he could imagine a monkey would do with a lit torch.

“Curse you, Rachel,” Elliott bellowed. There was only one white monkey in the palace, and it was Rachel’s pet. “You’re turning to arson now?!”

Elliott stomped out the little monkey-sized torch, then hurriedly looked around to see what had caught fire. He discovered that the monkey hadn’t torched any of the furniture. In fact, nothing was ablaze, so burning his room hadn’t been the goal. He did see some things that hadn’t been there before, however.

“What’s this?”

As Elliott entered the bedroom, he saw pots spread out across the floor—roughly ten of them. There were boards on the floor with piles of pine oil and sawdust on them, and the pots were sitting on top of those. The monkey had been lighting those piles. Inside the pots were what seemed to be corn kernels and oil.

Elliott didn’t know what popcorn was. Before he could act—although, even if he’d tried dousing the flames immediately, it wouldn’t have been easy—the first kernels began to pop.

Pop!

“Huh? What?!”

That single pop echoed and then spread rapidly.

Po-po-po-po-po-po-pop!

Unidentified white puffs flew all over. In short order, popcorn was

shooting up and then raining down like hail, violently striking Elliott from all directions. The fragrant scent of oil spread through the room.

“Ow! That’s hot! What’s happening?!”

The guards rushed to the scene, but they couldn’t do anything either. They were just as unfamiliar with popcorn as Elliott was, so they didn’t know if it was safe to suddenly pour water on it.

The number of white puffs continued multiplying as the chief lady-in-waiting came, despite no one calling for her, and snapped at Elliott. By the time the explosions had finally subsided, Elliott’s room was littered with little white puffs of corn as far as the eye could see.



An exhausted Wolanski was walking down a hallway near the rear gardens as he headed home. Along the way, he stopped to rest on a short set of stairs in the hall.

“Whew... I’m beat.”

He felt especially tired today. He hadn’t expected Miss Rachel to strike back with fireworks of her own. Had she had them with her from the beginning? What a formidable young lady.

“If I have to be run ragged by a young lady, I’d be much happier if she were flat.”

Rachel was the polar opposite of that. She was also tall and beautiful, without a hint of cuteness about her.

“They both have the same abundant natural beauty, but Miss Margaret really is more my type. Mm-hmm.”

Having come to this conclusion, Wolanski happened to look down the hall. There was the monkey. He was carrying a little basket on his back and seemed to be just passing by.

If I recall, the little scamp’s name is...

“Henry?”

He’s Miss Rachel’s pet, isn’t he?

“Ook!”

The monkey vigorously shook his head, but it was hard to imagine there were *two* monkeys like him in the palace. Wolanski wasn’t sure why the little simian was so stubbornly denying it, but it didn’t matter. Unlike His Highness, Wolanski wasn’t going to bully an animal.

“I don’t really mind if you want to lurk around. Just don’t pull any funny tricks, okay?”

Wolanski didn’t know if Henry understood, but he figured he should caution him anyway. Obviously, Wolanski had no way of knowing that the monkey was on his way back from making a huge mess of Elliott’s room.

“Hmm?”

It seemed pets took an interest in people who weren't interested in them, because the next thing Wolanski knew, Henry had come over and was looking up at him. Henry set his basket down and pulled an orange out of it. He offered it to Wolanski.

"Ook."

"You're giving me this? You're a good little guy."

Henry gave Wolanski the orange and sat down next to him. He looked up at Wolanski as if saying, "If you need someone to talk to, I'm all ears."

"I see. You're actually pretty cute up close like this."

Wolanski didn't know if the monkey understood him, but he was in the mood to vent, so he started unloading his thoughts on Henry.

"And that's how it is. I'm doing the best I can, but nothing's come of it."

Whether he understood Wolanski or not, Henry nodded sagely. When Wolanski paused for a moment, Henry made a sign saying that he'd be a moment and disappeared. He returned with a miniature bottle of whiskey and shot glasses.

"Ook!"

He set the two glasses side by side, skillfully pouring the amber liquor into them, and offered one to Wolanski.

"Ook!"

"Where did you get this?"

"Ook-ook!"

"What? 'From your master'? 'You're the only one she'll get mad at, so don't sweat it'? Henry, buddy, you're so manly..."

Touched, Wolanski gratefully accepted, clinking his glass against Henry's.

Being a monkey, Henry didn't actually drink alcohol, but having the drinks there made it feel as if they were close friends talking at a bar. Henry had good timing, and even as he nodded along to Wolanski's story, he always kept the man's drink topped off.



It wasn't long before an inebriated Wolanski griped to him about the difficulties of life as a working man.

"His Highness just doesn't understand what I go through."

"Ook-ook."

"Yeah, exactly! He's got it easy, not knowing what it's like to have to work under someone else."

"Ooook."

"You get it? You really get it? Yeah, that's right."

"Ook! Ook!"

"I should slap him with my letter of resignation, and then punch him in the face? Ah ha ha, if only I could."

Wolanski usually drank alone, but having someone to complain to was pretty nice. If Henry were a fellow noble, Wolanski would've had to stay guarded. And even with his own wife, he had trouble taking down his facade.

By the time they'd emptied out the bottle, Wolanski was feeling much better.

"Well, I'd best be getting home."

"Ook!"

"Hm? Oh, I just take a carriage from the gate. Don't worry! Thanks, Henry."

Henry put the empty bottle and shot glasses away in his basket, then presented something made of stiff cloth to Wolanski.

"Hmm? What is this?"

"Ooook. Ook! Ook!"

"Something nice? 'It makes most guys perk right up'? Ha ha ha, I feel bad accepting such a treasure from you. Thank you."

"Ook!"

After Henry waved goodbye, Wolanski walked away under a sky full of stars. He felt like all his troubles had been washed away and he'd be able to do his best tomorrow.

Looking up at the full moon, Wolanski smiled. When he tried to pass through the gate, he looked so dubious that the guards decided to stop and question him.



"You're the son of Marquess Wolanski, are you? Thank you for your service," said a knight.

Though his words were polite, the knight stood blocking Wolanski's path, a look of suspicion on his face. There was another knight standing behind Wolanski too.

"You seem rather inebriated. There wasn't any party tonight, was there? Did His Highness offer you a drink?"

“Oh, no, I was just drinking with a friend,” Wolanski answered.

“Oh-hoh. You’re saying you know someone else in the palace who’s in a position to offer you a drink?”

“Yes, little Henry the monkey.”

Normally, Wolanski would’ve known that he needed to explain himself a little better, whatever the facts might be, but this Wolanski had been drinking. He’d just polished off a bottle of distilled liquor, even if it was a miniature one, all by himself. It was fair to say most people would be drunk after that.

It wasn’t clear if the knights took issue with the fact that “Henry” didn’t have the right to offer alcohol in the palace or the fact that he was a monkey, but the look in their eyes changed.

“My Lord, is this really the time for jokes?” the knight asked.

“I’m not joking!” Wolanski insisted.

“Is that a fact? Well, who did you drink with, then?”

“I told you, with Henry the monkey.”

“I see. Fine, let’s say monkeys drink alcohol. What were you doing drinking with a monkey?”

With alcohol-fueled courage, Wolanski thrust out his chest and boldly answered, “I was griping about my job!”

“You were griping about your job...to the monkey?”

“Yes!”

“And...what did the monkey say?”

“He said if I hate it so much, I should go slap my boss with a letter of resignation and then punch him in the face!”

“The monkey said this?”

“Yes, of course. Henry and I were the only ones there, after all.”

“I see...”

The knight in front who’d been doing the questioning signaled with his eyes to his partner in the back. The partner, who was blocking Wolanski’s escape route, left for a moment to call for backup from the gate.

“By the way, what is that you’re carrying there, my lord?” the knight asked.

Wolanski was still holding whatever it was that Henry had given him. “What is it, I wonder?” he murmured as he spread it out and took a look. It was one of those things that women used to provide support for their chests.

“From where I’m standing,” said the knight, “you seem to be carrying some women’s underwear.”

“Ah, yes. Well. This would be what they call a bustier.”

“Where did you get that?”

“This? I got it from Henry when we were drinking earlier.”

“From the monkey?”

“From the monkey.”

The knight didn't bother to keep his voice down at this point. He told all the guards who'd arrived to take Wolanski to the knights' station.

“No, wait, wait! It's true. I got this from the monkey!” Wolanski cried.

“If I indulge you and accept that as a fact, which I really shouldn't, then why was this monkey giving you a piece of ladies' underwear, my lord?”

“Can't you see? As a token of friendship!”

The interrogating knight looked at one of the others and whispered, “You might want to call for more backup.”

“On it.”

“Why are you saying that?!” Wolanski asked.

“I'm curious why you think I wouldn't,” the knight answered, “but fine, let's change the question. What makes you think a monkey gave you this as a token of friendship?”

“Ah, he was saying that it makes most guys perk right up.”

“Hey, go see if there's any women who've lost theirs,” the knight ordered. “This guy's crazy enough that this might belong to some noblewoman.”

“Considering how far gone he is,” replied another knight, “we probably shouldn't put any age limits on the women he might have gone after.”

“Come on, people! Why do you insist on treating me like I'm crazy?!” Wolanski questioned.

“Because that's exactly what you are,” the knight replied. “Oh, excuse me. It's because you said you got it from a monkey.”

“I know who it belongs to too! Since Henry gave it to me, it must belong to Miss Rachel Ferguson.”

“Why didn't you return it on the spot?”

“Because it's packed full of Henry's friendship!”

“Hey, go down to the dungeon and run this by Miss Ferguson,” the knight ordered.

“Maybe we oughta stick this guy in there?” suggested the other.

“We can't put this deviant in with the young lady!”

While the two knights openly discussed what to do in front of him, Wolanski asked, “Do you people think I stole Miss Rachel's underwear to satisfy some sick fetish of mine?!”

“Well, yes. If we're being blunt about it.”

“Don't be absurd!” In the name of pride...yes, pride as the chairman of the Flat Chest Society, Wolanski loudly objected. “I would never be interested in Miss Rachel's undergarments! I am a flat-chester, through and through! I'm only interested in more modest

chest sizes!”

“Get some more men! We can’t let this pedo get away!”

“Excuse me?! I just told you. I appreciate flat chests! Why would you treat me like a pedophile?!”

“After everything you’ve said, why do you think we wouldn’t?!”

“Are you stupid?!” Wolanski asked, indignant. As a man of strong beliefs, he boldly stated, “We appreciate those with modest chests! Pedophiles appreciate those who are underage! We may seem similar, but we’re not! There may be some crossover, but our tastes are different!”

“Yeah, yeah, you can tell us all about it at the knights’ station! Don’t resist!”

On that day, several people witnessed the knights dragging a young nobleman away as he screamed the whole time.

“You’re wrong! You’ve got me all wrong! Listen, flat does not mean underage! I’m not a pedooooo!!!”



It was one of the rare occasions when Sofia, the overall manager of the maids, came to the dungeon to make a report herself.

“Their Majesties will be arriving in the capital soon, so I wanted to have a meeting with you to discuss policy,” Sofia explained.

“Good idea,” Rachel replied with a nod. “Once they’re back, all this ruckus will be over, and I’d rather not get myself into any trouble at the very end.”

While his mistress and her servant talked, Haley munched on an apple as he thought about the man he’d met in the hallway. He’d been rude, and he’d gotten Haley’s name wrong, but he’d also been a fun guy who laughed and cried a lot. He’d been rambling on about something, but since he seemed to be in a much better mood when he left, he must have sorted out whatever it was.

When they parted, Haley had given him something that all the human males liked. His mistress had plenty of them, so she wouldn’t miss one. He hoped the guy would have a good time with it.

Haley gazed up at the stars through the little barred window.



“Your Highness, the chef informs me this stuff is called popcorn. It’s edible, you know?” said a servant.

“Do I care?! Damn that Rachel! I can’t sleep like this!”

Chapter 8: The Curtains Fall on This Cheap Play

41: The Young Lady is Frightened by a Storm

“Prince Elliott is just too stupid.”

If you boiled it down, that might be all it would come to. No matter how the prince attacked Rachel, it always came to nothing. Rachel might have become complacent, thinking no one could disrupt her peaceful prison, but just as the people of the palace began speaking hopefully of the king’s return...a storm struck in the dungeon.



News of Wolanski’s arrest shocked those present in Elliott’s office.

“Wolanski was *what*?” Elliott cried. The color drained from his face. He’d just lost his third closest associate after George and Sykes. The impact of that was immeasurable.

Even the count’s son who’d brought the report couldn’t fully hide his distress. “Those who saw the incident say that, after the chief lady-in-waiting released him, he got drunk on the way to the gate and started shouting strange things that made the guards take him into custody.”

“He wouldn’t have! I can understand his wanting a drink after that tongue-lashing, but still... Wolanski would never do anything that could get him arrested! We need to protest this at once!”

“I heard he appeared in front of the gate wearing a lady’s undergarment on his head and declaring ‘Little girls are the best,’” explained a hanger-on.

“Oh, I see...” Elliott said, nodding. “Well, I hope he gets out soon.”

Elliott collapsed into his chair. That fact that he didn’t object to the accusation demonstrated that not even he could understand Wolanski’s distinction between flat chests and underage ones.

It seemed Wolanski still had some preaching to do. You would think Elliott, at least, would’ve trusted in his friend’s innocence.

Looking worried, Margaret ran over to Elliott. Now wasn’t the time to bask in the afterglow of the sublime experience she’d had the night before.

“Prince Elliott, cheer up!” Margaret said in a chipper tone.

Elliott sighed. “Margaret, I don’t even know what to do anymore.”

“I know! Take this. It’ll pick your spirits up!” Margaret pulled a vibrant purple piece of fabric out of her pocket. “This is humanity’s greatest treasure, filled with dreams and hope!”

“Oh? What are they?”

“Adam’s swim briefs! I won them in the scramble after he threw them into the crowd at the end!”

At least she hadn’t torn them off of him directly.

“They’re *his*?! Uh, no?! I don’t want them!” Elliott declared, incredulous.

“Huh? Why not?” Margaret looked at Elliott, confused as to why he was backing away.

Just then, one of Elliott’s hangers-on rushed into the room, bringing the fun to a full stop.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Miss Rachel is...”

Elliott’s eyes bulged. “What?! I don’t have time right now! Did she do something again?!”

“No, the thing is...she’s wailing about what her guests are doing to her!”

“Huh?!”



In the dungeon, where she’d shut herself away, Rachel was hiding behind the curtains of the shower room. That was the situation when Elliott and the others rushed to the scene. Her prior guests took no notice of them, however, and continued to yell at Rachel.

“Rachel! Every day you rest puts two days of hard work to waste! Come out here this instant!”

“Yes, that’s right! Persistence is power, they say. Do you realize it’s going to take half a year to make up for all the time you’ve wasted?!”

“Nooo!” Rachel whined. “I’m not engaged to His Highness anymore, so I don’t have to take your lessons to become queen!”

“Enough of this nonsense! Come out!”

Rachel had clearly been outmaneuvered.

When Elliott saw the two ladies standing with their arms crossed and shouting toward the prison, Elliott cringed.

“It’s Duchess Somerset and Countess Marlborough...”

Duchess Somerset was tasked with educating the future queen. She was like a living encyclopedia of palace life. She was the elder sister of Grand Duke Vivaldi, and although she’d been given the title of duchess, she had no husband.

The other woman, Countess Marlborough, was a retainer—not a

noble like Duchess Somerset—but she'd been born and raised in the palace, where she had an unusual career. She was in charge of teaching etiquette. Her father and husband were both protocol officers, so she was fiendishly strict when it came to manners.

Not only were these two women calling Rachel out for neglecting her lessons, they were reprimanding her on all aspects of her manners. It was a double assault.

"I've sent numerous letters to Their Majesties," Countess Marlborough said, "appealing for your release and asking for their directions on our policy going forward. And, finally, I received a response from Her Majesty indicating that we will be continuing with your education. We were at a loss for what to do when the prince took leave of his senses, but now that the policy has been decided, we intend to work harder than ever to make up for lost time!"

Countess Marlborough clenched her fist as she yelled. It wasn't very good manners.

Duchess Somerset's brow was furrowed. "Honestly... It took more than two months of writing letters to get a response. Their Majesties are too indecisive. I'll be having a word with them when they return."

The king hadn't wanted to touch any of the letters from these nags, so he'd had a chamberlain verify their contents and then ignored them. He was in for a talking-to.

"I! Can't! Come! Out! I'm locked up inside here! I can't possibly leave and take lessons!" Rachel insisted.

"Then you can take them here!" Duchess Somerset countered. "The only thing you can't do in there is dance practice!"

"Why should I have to study here, in my home away from home?!"

"Because you've not been studying at all!"

No matter how Rachel objected, the two ladies refused to give up. But of course they wouldn't. If a young girl like Rachel could cow them, they never would've made it as royal instructors.

Rachel stayed hidden behind the curtain as she shouted, "What point is there in taking royal lessons when my engagement to His Highness has been broken?!"

"You need to have an education befitting the future queen of this country!" Duchess Somerset shouted back.

They were talking past each other.

"I told you, His Highness—" Rachel began.

"What Elliott says is immaterial!" Duchess Somerset interjected, shouting Rachel into silence. "You are to be queen, Rachel, and that is final. The queen's decision to continue your lessons means Their Majesties intend for this to happen. If we beat some sense into Elliott, he'll be more reasonable!"

The duchess's views on education were a relic of a past era.

"And what if he still refuses?!" Rachel asked.

"Once I beat some sense into him, he'll be reasonable!"

The duchess would probably get along great with Martina.

"I don't want the engagement either!" Rachel ranted. "I don't want to marry a nitwit with nothing going for him but his looks!"

Even though the comment came from his now ex-fiancée, it still discomforted Elliott. Not that the ladies noticed. They were in the middle of their heated argument.

"It's because Elliott's such an empty-headed narcissist that we need a queen who has her act together!" Duchess Somerset explained. She was getting worked up, but she still hadn't noticed Elliott and his entourage. "I always knew that with that head of his, useless as a pot with a hole in it, he would never last as king. He is the heir simply because the oldest son inherits, but that is precisely why we need you, someone who'll be able to cover up all the cracks."

The lady was laying bare painful truths that Elliott never wanted to hear.

"I don't want to be queen or marry His Highness!" Rachel hissed.

"A trivial detail that does not matter to me!" Duchess Somerset replied.

"Could you try to care?! It's pretty important, you know?! How about showing some respect for my opinion?!"

"As a noblewoman, you have to expect a political marriage! His Majesty wants this marriage, so you have no say in the matter!"

"But I don't wanna marry that moron!"

Elliott was still caught in the crossfire. He could barely stay on his feet with all the hurtful barbs aimed at him.

"If you don't want him, then Raymond is an option," Duchess Somerset stated. "They've chosen you to be queen. They'll decide who is to be king later."

"That's backward!" Rachel retorted. "Normally, the royal family is supposed to swap out the wife, aren't they?!"

"You can't keep a country going if you're that soft!"

The women went on saying whatever they pleased as Elliott fell to his hands and knees.

"Prince Elliott! Pull yourself together!" Margaret pleaded.

She reassuringly rubbed Elliott's back as she glared at the arguing women from behind. She decided to step up and say something on his behalf, as reckless as that might be.

"Hey, where do you get off, talking about Prince Elliott like that?! He rose up against Rachel's tyranny because it couldn't continue any longer!"

"Margaret!" Elliott squealed. Her words had moved him and

brought tears to his eyes.

“Prince Elliott!”

The pair stared deeply into each other’s eyes. It was a touching moment, soon to be rudely destroyed by a couple of finely aged ladies.

“Elliott?! You have the audacity to show yourself in front of us?!” Duchess Somerset questioned.

“You’ve always run away from your lessons, Elliott, so I knew you would never amount to anything worthwhile, but...” Countess Marlborough paused for dramatic effect. “It’s so *convenient* that you decided to show your face here! I’ll show you there are things you cannot get away with!”

“I-I did the right thing!” Elliott stuttered, trying to defend himself.

“I said...!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Countess Marlborough strode toward Elliott, her face a mask of rage akin to those of the ogres of legend. “I can see that your attitude will need to be rectified before you’ll be ready to apologize to Rachel!”

“Huh? Wait, what are you...?!”

Countess Marlborough suddenly grabbed Elliott and forced him to bend over.

“Whuh?!”

She tucked Elliott, an almost-grown man, under one arm, and...
Slip!

“Huh?!” Elliott screamed.

“Eek!” Margaret shrieked.

The countess had pulled Elliott’s pants down to his knees.

“What are you doing, Lady Marlborough?!” Elliott asked.

“I ought to ask you the same thing! I am going to punish your foolish behavior and let Rachel see how sincerely sorry you are!”

Countess Marlborough raised her hand, then swung it at Elliott’s surprisingly smooth posterior.

Smack!

“S-Stop it!”

“I’ve only struck you once! Have some spine!”

“Th-That’s not the issue here!”

The countess was having none of his lip, and she raised her hand again.

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

A satisfying sound echoed through the dungeon.

“Please, stop, Lady Marlborough!” Elliott entreated her. “Think of how this looks for me!”

“I will not!” the countess asserted.

The spanking only got more intense.

“Stop it! Stooooop!”

Elliott wasn't begging her to stop only because it hurt. Margaret, the love of his life, was watching. Hateful Rachel was peeking out from behind the curtains too. His hangers-on, whom he needed to appear dignified in front of, were looking on, petrified. Everyone he didn't want to look bad in front of was here, and an old lady was smacking his bottom like a naughty child. The physical pain was nothing next to the utter humiliation! Not that Countess Marlborough cared one whit about that.

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!



It went on and on, for what felt like forever.

“Please, stop it! Ow! Please?! This is humiliating!”

Elliott’s pleas went unheeded. His followers knew whom they were up against and wouldn’t step in. If it had been a knight spanking their liege, they might have put Elliott’s orders first, but defying this untouchable hag would’ve been far more dangerous than ignoring Elliott.

Elliott’s butt was now swollen, and he could do nothing but groan.

Duchess Somerset looked at Countess Marlborough and said, “I think you’ve done quite enough.”

Elliott smiled, no strength left to voice his gratitude, but...

“I’ll take over from here.”

Elliott would later describe the experience by saying that there were no words to express the utter despair he’d felt in that moment.

Three years older than her brother Grand Duke Vivaldi, the guardian of the royal family took Elliott with a power that belied her advanced age.

“Look, Countess Marlborough. At my age, I cannot swing my hand repeatedly the way that you can,” Duchess Somerset said, despite having a grown man tucked under her arm. In her other hand, she held a leather sandal. “Instead, I use knowledge and experience to make up for what I’ve lost to the ravages of old age.”

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

The sound of leather on hide echoed through the dungeon with greater force and speed.

“This has been quite educational. Thank you,” Countess Marlborough said.

“Mm-hm.”

“You didn’t have to do this!” Elliott sobbed.

Just as they set Elliott, who’d shouted himself hoarse, down on the floor...

“Hey, you old biddies! What do you think you’re doing to Prince Elliott?!”

Margaret was recklessly picking a fight with the dangerous old ladies. Elliott’s entourage desperately signaled “Don’t do it!” but Margaret was too angry to notice.

“Oh, and who might you be?” Countess Marlborough asked.

Margaret puffed up her chest. “I’m Margaret Poisson! Of the Baronial House of Poisson!”

“My word, such impudence! It seems some punishment is in order.”

“Whuh?”

Before Margaret had time to register what was happening,

Countess Marlborough pushed Margaret under her arm and was rolling up her skirt and pulling down her underwear.

“Wait, what?! I’m a girl! What do you think you’re doing to me with everybody watching?!”

“No man would lust after a behind as unripe as yours,” Countess Marlborough explained.

“That’s not...?! They’re all looking away! And turning red!”

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Aaargh!”

“What an unladylike scream!”

“D-Do you think Prince Elliott’s just gonna keep quiet and let you do this to me?!”

“Gonna?! What is a young lady like you doing speaking like gutter trash?!”

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Aaaaaaaah!”

Noticing that the shrieks of pain had changed, Rachel poked her head out from behind the curtain...and screamed.

“That’s mine! My punching bag! And I was looking forward to spanking her for the first time too!”

“Who’re you calling a goddamn punching bag?!” Margaret hollered.

“Such language!” Countess Marlborough exclaimed.

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Countess, it’s about time you let me take a swing at her,” Duchess Somerset pointed out.

“You were lying when you said this was punishment!” Margaret wailed. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you, you sickos?!”

Rachel clamored for a turn. “Me next! Me next!”

“You, shut up! You psycho sadist!”

“Why have you not rectified your manner of speech?!” Duchess Somerset asked.

“Oh, piss off!” Margaret growled. “You stop hitting me first!”

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

“Mm, what a smackable rump she has!” Duchess Somerset remarked.

Countess Marlborough agreed. “Doesn’t she, though?”

“Ohh, my punching bag is getting more and more used!” Rachel complained.

“I hope you all die!”

“Such language!”



“Now, have we made ourselves clear, Rachel? You had best start

acting more obedient unless you want the same thing to happen to you.”

Having administered a corrective lesson, the two harsh instructors responsible for educating the next queen went on their way, their faces glowing with satisfaction. They left behind Rachel, as well as Elliott and Margaret, who were both lying prone with their exposed bottoms in the air, and Elliott’s awkwardly silent entourage.

No one said a word.

Elliott squirmed to his feet, attempting to pull up his pants even though he couldn’t stand up straight. He gave up halfway because of the intense pain in his swollen rump.

Margaret was sobbing uncontrollably, but she still somehow managed to get her underwear back up. Her skirt also rolled back down without issue, obviously.

In the absolute silence of the dungeon, Rachel searched for something to say. She shot a wink at Margaret and gave her a thumbs-up.

“That was cute!”

“Shut up!”

Haley looked down at Elliott, sympathetically offering him an orange, as if saying, “Don’t let it get you down. Here, eat up.”

“Shut up!” Elliott spat. “I don’t need sympathy from a filthy monkey!”

“Damn it! We won’t forget this!” Margaret vowed.

Elliott ran off crying, his butt still half-exposed. Margaret rushed after him. His hangers-on all looked at one another, not sure if they should follow.



Elliott didn’t leave his room for a week after that.

42: The Prince Assassinates the Young Lady (or Plans To)

A strange atmosphere hung in Prince Elliott’s office. When he’d finally emerged from secluding himself in his room, he’d done so with the vicious aura of a chihuahua backed into a corner. He’d immediately ordered all his followers to gather in his office, and they’d quickly complied. This was an Elliott none of them had ever seen before.

“Gentlemen, tomorrow is the day my parents return from their royal inspection,” Elliott informed them. “They stayed in the town of Tyrell last night, and we’ve received word suggesting they will arrive tomorrow morning.”

“Ohh, at long last...”

“This inspection took a lot longer than most...”

“I hear His Majesty fell ill during the trip.”

Holding up a hand to silence their excited whispers, Elliott added, “The initial plan was to make Rachel confess her crimes, drag her before my father, and let him formally recognize the end of my engagement to her and the start of a new one with Margaret. However...!”

Elliott thrust his fists into the air, then slammed them down on the desk.

“That unspeakable witch shows no fear of justice, instead doing as she pleases down in the dungeon! I was never counting on her feeling genuinely contrite, but she’s having more fun now than she did on the outside! That’s crazy, isn’t it?!”

His followers looked at one another. It was just as Elliott said, and they were as painfully aware of it as he was, so what was the point of rounding them all up to tell them what they already knew? Confused, they all cocked their heads to the side.

“That’s not all,” Elliott continued. “Because the royal inspections dragged on, Rachel’s people have been able to act behind the scenes. Every one of the incidents she’s been involved in have worked out in her favor. Now we’re at the point where people in the palace openly voice their support for her within earshot of us!”

To be more accurate, they were saying things like, “The prince is unreliable,” and, “It was a mistake to punish Rachel.” They weren’t directly supporting Rachel. In fact, if Elliott had carried this off without a hitch, none of that would’ve been said, but Elliott and his people couldn’t tell the difference...because poor little Ellie was a nitwit.

“If my father comes back with things as they are, he might very well write everything off as a misunderstanding on our part. Don’t make me laugh! If I let that happen, what were these three months of struggle and hardship for?!”

His position was considerably worse than he’d just said, but that was how Elliott saw it.

“So, here’s the plan.”

Elliott finally moved on to his main point. His followers waited with bated breath.

“I’ve held back long enough. We assassinate Rachel tonight!”

His followers wanted to say, “But you’ve never held back.” However, no one had the guts to say anything in this situation.

All of Elliott’s followers tensed. This was different from his usual outbursts. The cornered look in his eyes, touched by madness, told them that Elliott was deadly serious. He had the reckless bloodlust of a long-haired chihuahua ready to try and tear out the throat of a

mastiff.

Elliott pointed at the son of a count. "You, prepare weapons. Rachel has a crossbow. We'll need at least three shields, three crossbows, and, if possible, three long spears to finish the job. Bring three men, and get them ready at once!"

"Yes, sir!" the count's son replied.

The prince looked at the second son of a viscount who was seated across from him. "You get two guys to ensure no one enters the dungeon. My father will return tomorrow, and Rachel may have her own people coming to see her, not just the ordinary guests."

"Yes, sir!"

"We'll act after the prison guard leaves in order to prevent anyone from discovering her before morning."

"He barely works nights, despite being a prison guard," noted a hanger-on.

"That's not important now. Anyway, let's go!"

The boys moved into action, rushing out of the office to carry out Elliott's orders.

A little while after, the maid who'd been preparing tea put the cups away and left the room. The moment she entered the halls the servants used, she abandoned the tea cart and took off running.



Even as the count's son hurried around with his comrades, he couldn't help but complain.

"Firm action is fine and all, but His Highness could have said something about it sooner."

It was evening now, and they were preparing to strike. The prison guard would be going home any time now. If the lights in the dungeon were on in the middle of the night, it would likely attract the suspicion of passing knights on patrol, so if they were going to storm the prison, it had to be soon.

"It didn't have to be yesterday, but if he could have told us before noon, at least, I'd have brought weapons from home."

They'd yet to consider whether the guards at the gate would let them through carrying spears and crossbows. They were Elliott's idiots, after all.

The count's son had no clue where to acquire them, no place he could go, and no idea what to do, so he led his comrades in circles around the palace.

"Can we steal them from the knights' armory? It's guarded, though..." he wondered aloud.

As the count's complacent son struggled with the greatest worry of his pampered life, one of the boys who'd come with him, the third son

of a baron, tapped him on the shoulder.

“There! Look at that!”

“Hm?”

Up ahead, next to some sort of warehouse, were three shields, three spears, and three crossbows leaning against the wall. There were even full quivers of crossbow bolts with them. A piece of paper had been posted on the wall, saying, “Currently being aired out, do not touch! - The Royal Guard.”

The boys slapped one another on the shoulders with evident glee.

“It’s a sign from Heaven!”

“This is just what we need! If we bring these to His Highness, he won’t get mad at us!”

The four of them checked that the coast was clear before hurriedly making off with the weapons.

Why were they the exact number they needed? Why would the knights be airing out just these ones? Why were there no guards when they’d been left in plain view?

The boys never suspected a thing because they were Elliott’s idiots.



The warning to the prison had arrived after the viscount’s first son, as he had headed there directly after leaving the meeting in Elliott’s office.

The gardener, who’d heard the information from the maid in the prince’s office, stopped where he could see the prison from a distance and observed how Elliott’s men were watching the place. He circled around the building once to confirm, then tilted his head to the side.

“They’re only watching the door?”

Three pampered noblemen’s sons were watching the dungeon, just as he’d been told there would be. But the three of them were just standing there, looking in the direction of the door. They hadn’t even noticed the knight, who’d been posted there with the same task, staring at them in confusion from the bushes next to them. He suspected it could be a trap, but look as he might, there wasn’t one. The confused gardener was not familiar with the quality of Elliott’s idiots.

Whatever was going on, they weren’t going to get in his way, so the gardener circled around to the barred window in the back of the building. The knight on watch there was on the same side, so the gardener briefly explained his business and had the knight keep an eye out for trouble.

When the gardener crouched down next to the window and called out to Rachel, she answered him immediately.

“Is something the matter? No one has had to contact me directly with an urgent message before now.”

“Yes, ma’am! The truth is...”

Once Rachel heard what was happening, it took little time for her to come to a conclusion.

“Then we’re the ones providing their weapons, correct?”

“Yes. Our agents inside the knights have prepared some that will be of absolutely no use to them, just in case.”

“Let His Highness and his men attack, then. We have a mountain of circumstantial evidence against him. Now let’s let him do something so big that it will be impossible for him to excuse his way out of it.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Rachel had the gardener change places with the knight, then gave the knight orders to take back to the other knights.

“There’s no need to ensure that our people are the ones on night duty,” Rachel added. “However, see to it that this man is the officer on duty.”

“Do you want us to withdraw our watchers from around the prison? It seems His Highness has forgotten we’re monitoring you.”

“Things are fine as is. Once the incident happens, it might pose a problem if people asked why there was no one watching me tonight. In fact, I think we should let them take care of running to the knight station with word that His Highness forced his way in here.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

While Elliott’s idiots were getting excited about their new weapons, Rachel’s people were silently making preparations of their own.



Once the sky was shrouded in darkness...

“Go!”

Elliott gave the order, and his cronies stormed into the dungeon all at once. Their footsteps echoed heavily as they entered the front room—the shield-bearers first, followed by the crossbowmen—their weapons aimed toward the cell. Elliott was the last to enter, confidently addressing the prison’s resident. He looked calm, but his eyes were tinged with madness.

“Rachel, knowing you, you’ve no doubt heard that mother and father will be returning tomorrow. I expect your plan is to claim innocence and have my mother free you because she likes you so much, but...sadly, that won’t be happening. You’ll never see the dawn.”

He was saying it in a roundabout way, but Rachel knew what he

meant.

As Elliott waited eagerly to hear her response, she let out an exasperated sigh. "I'd thought you'd have thought this through a little more..."

"Huh? What? Did you think I'd never resort to force? You underestimated me. I'm a man of action," Elliott asserted.

"Well, a word of warning to the 'man of action,' then. You shouldn't wait for your victim to take cover, you know?"

"What?!"

Hurrying to the front of the group, he saw Rachel behind a pile of boxes with her own crossbow leveled at them. In other words, her defenses were much better than those of his men, who only had shields to protect themselves.

"Why did you wait for her to get behind cover?!" Elliott bellowed.

"Well, we couldn't just up and shoot her..."

"You could have managed a, 'Don't move!'"

"Oh, yeah, you're right."

As Elliott raged at his incompetent cronies, Rachel gave him a warning.

"This is happening because you don't work out the fine details of your plans. If you don't do something about your sloppiness, you'll have a lot of trouble later, you know? But you've been lying to yourself about it for so long that you don't even notice your pants are on fire, do you?"

Seeing Rachel still able to run her mouth when surrounded like this, Elliott was struck with an admiration greater than his hatred for her. He was doing the thing where a person who falsely believes they have the upper hand looks down on others because they feel omnipotent.

"Oh-hoh. I'm impressed you can talk like that when we have you cornered. Ha ha ha, I'll remember you for your spirit, at least. But if anyone's a liar with their pants on fire, it's you."

"No, it's you, Your Highness."

"Heh! You're all talk... Hm?"

Elliott noticed an odd sensation on his backside. Turning to look, he saw his pants were on fire.

"Huh?"

Looking down, Elliott saw Rachel's filthy little ape there, holding a match up to his behind. The moment he understood the situation, he felt the heat.

"Waugh?! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

His hangers-on watched dumbstruck as Elliott rolled on the ground. Some realized what was happening and helped him extinguish the flames, so Elliott got off with only a burned pair of

pants and some singed underwear. He'd have to have the doctor look at his behind tomorrow.

"Wh-What does your pet think he's doing all of a sudden?!" Elliott asked.

"A little joke where you fail to notice your pants are literally on fire," Rachel explained.

"That's too dark to laugh at! I almost died, okay?!"

"You're about to kill me, so I don't see why you're so squeamish..." Looking at the little monkey who'd returned to her side, the two of them shrugged in unison. "Haley put a lot of work into that gag. You have no sense of humor."

"Ook."

"You're dead! Kill the filthy little ape first!"

As the crossbowmen tried to move their shaky aim to a new target, Haley hopped up the wooden boxes and out the barred window.

Elliott, looking like a fool with a hole in his pants, began tittering madly as his shoulders trembled with rage.

"Heh, heh heh heh... Rachel. Now you've gone and pissed me off!"

"I assure you, I'm the one who ought to be angry at your failure to understand Haley's best gag."

"Would you cut the crap?!"

Enraged, Elliott ordered his goons to ready their weapons. Rachel raised her crossbow in response. Then, just as Elliott was about to order them to fire, the viscount's son, who was nearest to the door, hesitantly called out to him.

"U-Um..."

"What?!" Elliott snapped.

The viscount's son ducked his head as Elliott shouted at him, but he still pointed toward the door and made his report.

"Um... There's been a lot of noise outside. There, uh, may be people here..."

"What? Go look!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" The viscount's son rushed up the stairs, then back down just as fast. "Y-Your Highness! It's the monkey! The monkey's setting off fireworks outside!"

"Whuh...?"

Elliott didn't understand what he was saying, so the viscount's son repeated himself.

"Miss Rachel's monkey has been setting off fireworks!"

Behind Elliott, the count's lazy son murmured, "Come to think of it, he struck that match on his own..."

They soon learned why the monkey was doing it.

"Everyone, drop your weapons!"

The knights on night duty rushed into the dungeon, fully armed.

“Wh-What’s the meaning of this?!” Elliott demanded, but the stern-faced officer returned the question.

“That’s what I ought to say. What is going on down here in the dungeon?”

Our favorite band of idiots were already surrounded, and the numerous palace guards were disarming them.

“Th-That’s classified information!” Elliott replied. “You don’t need to know it, so I don’t need to tell you!”

“Oh, I see.”

When Elliott puffed himself up and started shouting, the leader of the knights backed down rather easily. He barked an order to his men.

“Investigate the weapons they were carrying!”

“What?!” Elliott cried.

“Earlier, we discovered that a number of weapons from the armory, which had been left to air out, had disappeared. Then, just as we were gathering the men to go look for them, there was all this ruckus.”

One of the soldiers shouted, “I recognize all of these. They’re stolen!”

“I see. Take them to the knights’ station! We’ll let them take their time explaining why they stole them!”

“Eeeek?!” As Elliott watched in shock, his followers were all bound and dragged out of the room. His jaw fell open. “Wha...?”

“Your Highness. We’ll be asking you some questions about your involvement later. That’s not a problem, I hope?”

“Fine... But!” Elliott pointed at Rachel, who was hiding in the back. “She has weapons in the prison too!”

The officer looked at Rachel. “Your Highness, why is the young lady holding a weapon?”

“Why? Why would you ask me that?!”

The knight continued, his eyes full of suspicion as he said, “To the best of our knowledge, this young lady was suddenly bound and thrown into the prison here in the middle of a nighttime party.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Then why does she have a weapon? Do you mean to tell me she was able to hide it under her dress, perhaps?”

“Uh, well, you see...” This was a sore spot for Elliott. “She, um... She had things ready for her inside the prison.”

The officer’s eyes grew even more stern. “In the prison? When she was suddenly apprehended at the party? A young lady who shouldn’t have even had a change of clothes on her?”

“No, look! She has all sorts of stuff in there!”

Even after looking at the cell, the knight’s reaction remained

unchanged.

“It’s a prison for the nobility. Of course there’d be furniture. You’re not going to try and tell me there was a crossbow in there as a wall decoration, are you?”

“Wh-Why, you...!”

Ignoring Elliott, who was unable to muster an adequate response, the officer on duty asked Rachel instead.

“Why is it that you have a crossbow, young lady?”

Rachel was visibly trembling.

“H-His Highness... He suddenly rushed in here, saying he was going to finish me off before Their Majesties could return. He said it would look bad if he killed me without some justification and threw this to me with a sneer. I couldn’t just quietly let them murder me, so I at least tried to resist...”

Rachel began to sob.

“Your Highness. It would appear we’re going to have more questions for you on other matters.” He was looking at the prince of his own country like you would a common criminal.

Elliott panicked. “W-Wait! That’s hers! She brought it in there herself!”

“I believe I already asked you about that before, did I not? I’ve still yet to hear an adequate explanation for why a young lady, taken by surprise and thrown into prison, would have such a thing.”

The officer was right. Pushed into a corner, Elliott struggled for an explanation. Thinking back to what had happened at the time, it hit him.

“I know! The knights on duty the night we threw her in here saw her take the crossbow out of her luggage! Ask them!”

“This was three months ago? We work on rotation, so the guys on duty then would have gone to the front lines two months ago. They won’t be back for another four.”

“No way!”

Elliott had forgotten that his great-uncle and the prime minister had also seen Rachel using the crossbow. Not that it made a difference. The officer was one of Rachel’s people, so he wasn’t going to be listening to Elliott’s opinion.

“A-Anyway, it’s a problem that she has a weapon, right?!” Elliott said desperately.

The officer turned to Rachel. “Well then, young lady, we’ve taken them away now, so would you kindly turn that over to me?”

“Here.”

“Whaa?!” Elliott’s face fell as Rachel simply let go of the crossbow that had caused him so much consternation.

“Now then, Your Highness. Since I am sure you won’t run away,

I'll be waiting at the knights' station."

"I know!" Elliott spat.

After the officer impertinently reminded Elliott of this, he and the other knights on duty took their leave.

"That damn jerk..."

Despite his indignation at the less-than-princely treatment he'd just received, Elliott sensed that now was his chance. Now he could stab Rachel from behind.

Elliott still had his own saber. Rachel's guard was down now that his followers were gone. If he suddenly threw it at her, he might deal a fatal blow.

"All right..."

Just as he put his hand on the hilt of his saber to draw and then hurl it at Rachel's back...

"Here it is."

Rachel pulled a crossbow out of a nearby box.

"Whuh...?"

Rachel swiftly drew back the string and set a bolt.

"And we're good to go."

"Y-You... You had another one?!"

"Your Highness..." Rachel shook her head in dismay. "It's an ironclad rule that you should always have a second gun ready in case your first jams, you know?"

"No, I don't know!"

Why was she talking like a veteran mercenary?

"Now, I think it's time for a little talk," Rachel said calmly.

Rachel had a ranged weapon, while Elliott had a saber that was too short to reach her and no second weapon if he threw it at her. He was suddenly at a disadvantage.

"Although, I'm not the one you'll be talking to."

As Elliott slowly backed away, Rachel lowered the crossbow.

"Huh?"

Unable to figure out why she'd lowered her weapon, Elliott grew suspicious of everything. Behind him, there was the sound of a door opening, followed by footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Welcome," Rachel said. "Sorry to make you come when you'd just left on your honeymoon."

"It's fine. I had some business with him too."

The voice that answered Rachel's friendly greeting came from someone who wasn't supposed to be there.

"It...can't be..." Elliott turned to look, his joints creaking like a rusty door.

"Hey, Your Highness. It's been a while."

A girl with her black hair in a ponytail stood there.

“Why is Martina here?” Elliott asked. Hadn’t she set off for the frontier with Sykes?

“Well, you see,” Martina began, “I came back because there’s a little something I just have to ask you about.” The original dangerous girl smiled at him, her pupils wide and filled with madness. “There’s this book, *His Highness is After Me!*... It says in here that you ‘gobbled up’ an unwilling Sykes? Is that true?”

“Huh? Uh, what? What’s that book?”

“I asked Sykes about it, but no matter what I did to him, he insisted that it wasn’t true and everything written in here is a lie. I got a little carried away, and Sykes had to go to the hospital...so I’m here to ask you now.”

“Martina, it’s okay to ask His Highness, but do avoid punishing him anywhere people will see you,” Rachel warned her cheerfully.

“Oh, I know. He’ll still *look* perfectly fine when I’m done with him.” Martina slapped the palm of her hand with what looked like the leg she’d torn off of a desk somewhere prior. “Now, Your Highness... We’re short on time. Answer me quickly, would you?”

Elliott’s screams echoed until morning.

43: The Newlyweds Have a Talk

This happened a little while before the king and queen’s return.

Four days before Prince Elliott was tortured by Martina in the name of “sorting out the facts,” a *minor* marital spat broke out in a fortress on the frontier.



In order to prepare for potential enemy attacks, the soldiers garrisoned at the border fortresses lived in lodging houses inside them. The eastern border wasn’t that tense, but the fortresses were far from any towns, so even if they’d wanted a house of their own, there were none outside in the surrounding wasteland. Therefore, the newlywed Abigails set up their new home in a unit of a row house.

As Martina Abigail cheerfully carried food to the table, her new husband Sykes Abigail watched with admiration—not with terror...or so he tried to convince himself.

“What’s got you in such a good mood?” Sykes asked. “Did something nice happen?”

Martina began fidgeting and looked at her beloved husband with upturned eyes.

“Hm? Oh, nothing special. I just wanted to see you eat.”

“Yeah?”

Though she’d answered with a smile, Sykes sensed something off

with the way Martina was acting. She'd said she wanted to see him eat, but here in the fort, they didn't cook their own meals. That was handled by the kitchen staff, so it wasn't something she'd made herself. Plus, the menu was just the usual bacon, potatoes, and vegetable soup—nothing more luxurious than normal.

Something was wrong. Sykes's sixth sense—limited to Martina—started sounding alarm bells.

He didn't remember messing up recently. If he'd been looking at another girl, she'd have punished him on the spot, and there was no one in the fort who'd listen to him gripe about Martina. He hadn't rejected any of her requests, and nothing had seemed out of the ordinary as recently as when they went to bed last night.

For now, I should eat up and then report to the command center and ask to be sent on a long-range patrol. While I'm away, they can get some of our comrades who can read Martina better to listen to her complaints.

As Sykes was starting to put together a schedule in his head, Martina smiled and asked him, "Well? Is it good?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it's delicious. Is there something special about it?"

"Yeah."

Setting down the empty pot, Martina smoothly circled around behind Sykes. She gently placed her hands on his shoulders, bringing her cheek next to his.

"Because...depending on your answers, this could be your last meal."

Sykes kicked off the floor and tried to dash to the exit, but Martina strengthened her grip on his shoulders and stopped him dead in his tracks.

"What's wrong, Sykes?"

"Everything's wrong! Who wouldn't try to run when you announce you're about to murder them?!"

Sykes shivered as he felt a current of cold air run from the back of his head all the way down his spine. However, the air in the room was hot, if anything. It felt cold because Sykes's instincts had picked up the murderous intent bearing down on him.

"Wh-What? I haven't done anything to make you angry lately, have I?!" Sykes asked.

"No, I'm happy you've been such a good boy," Martina beamed. "If only you'd always been."

"I can't fix the past, can I?!"

Martina slapped Sykes across the face with a book. "I was cleaning this morning, when I found *this*."

The book she passed over his shoulder and into his trembling hands was...*His Highness is After Me!*

“Why?! I threw this book out when I was packing!”

Sykes had said that without meaning to. It was a bad move. The chill he felt behind him suddenly got a lot colder.

“So you *do* recognize it...”

“M-Martina...”

With an intimidating presence he couldn’t possibly turn and face, his darling wife Martina spoke to him in the sweetest of tones.

“I was careless. I was able to notice the sows that tried to tempt you, but I never would’ve guessed that you were interested in men too.”

“I’m not! I’m not romantically interested in men!”

“Maybe, but even if he took you by force at first, it felt good for you, being pursued by His Highness like that. It’s making me *jealous*, you know?”

Sykes mustered all his strength and courage and turned to face Martina. “Wait, Martina! I’m honestly, truly not into guys! And this is a work of fiction. Nothing like this ever happened between Elliott and me.”

“Ohh?” Martina smiled pleasantly at him. “Now tell me the truth.”

“But that is the truth?! This is just a thing someone wrote! You saw how head over heels His Highness was for Margaret, didn’t you? He’s not interested in me either!”

“Margaret?”

“Ah...”

Martina’s frozen smile was terrifying.

“Hey, Sykes, I’m jealous of Margaret too.”

“Huh? No, seriously, there was never anything between Margaret and me.”

“Oh, nooo, that’s not what I’m jealous about, see?” Martina had wrapped her hands around Sykes’s, and she began crushing them with all her might. “It’s that the name of a sow like that is occupying any of your limited brain space, okay?”

“You’re being unreasonable?! Ow! Stop it, please!” Sykes begged.

“Sykes, if you have that much space, fill it with nothing but my name.”

“Okay, okay! I’ll try! I’ll do my goddamn best!”

“Good. I hope you mean it.”

Martina grinned, but she hadn’t released her crushing grip on his hands just yet.

“Martina?”

“Now, back to the main topic. Tell me, was His Highness intense?”

Martina never changed.

“I’m telling you, that book is a lie! It’s not the truth! Believe me, okay?!”

“Of course! Of course I believe you, Sykes! Now, what’s the truth?”

“You don’t believe me at all, do you?!”

“You belong to me, and I won’t give you up to anyone, not even His Highness.”

“I’m telling you, His Highness never ‘made me his!’”

“Then why would you have a book like this, hmm?” Martina let go of Sykes for a moment to tear the rather thick hardcover volume in two with a smile. “Tell me, Sykes. Was His Highness so dear to you that you wanted this reminder of your love close at hand?”

Placing the two halves of the torn book on top of each other, Martina began tearing them into four. Sykes blanched at this inhuman display of strength.

“You’re wrong! Yes, I bought it, but I didn’t know it was about that!”

“Ohh... Even though you two made love so passionately?”

“I told you, that’s not real. Believe me, please...”



Martina watched for a while as Sykes knelt on the floor, trembling and begging for forgiveness. After some time, she crouched next to him and gently wrapped his hands with her own.

“Okay, I understand.”

“Martina!”

“I’ll try asking your body until I have proof.”

“You don’t believe meeeeeee?!”



In the command center in the middle of the fort, cringing staff officers shuffled into the room. There had been report after report from the rooms near the Abigail residence that something terrible was occurring inside.

“What? What happened this time?!” an officer asked.

“We don’t know! Have the two of them submit a report.”

“You think we could?”

Just as they had settled on maybe evacuating the nearby rooms, the two people in question showed up. Martina had brought her husband to the infirmary, all while smiling cheerily.

The medical officer nervously asked her, “Wh-What could be the problem, so early in the day?”

The black-haired girl smiled and stuck her tongue out cutely. “Heh heh, Sykes tosses and turns in his sleep.”

It didn’t take a doctor to tell that the injuries Sykes had sustained were not from rolling out of bed. But the medical officer didn’t pry.

“I see. Well, could you set him down on the bed over there?”

“Okaaay.”

There were some questions you didn’t ask if you valued your life, and Martina was still in her evil-god mode. As proof of that...

“Oof... Sykes, you be a good boy here in the infirmary, okay?”

Martina set Sykes down on the bed without making a sound. She’d been carrying him in her arms, princess style, despite his being much larger and heavier than she was.

If his medical report showed that the injuries were the result of violence, Martina might decide to *persuade* him otherwise. The medical officer, his face pale with fear, ordered a month of bed rest without any stated reason, then hung a card saying “no visitors” in front of Sykes’s bed.



“Now, then.”

Martina cracked her knuckles as she headed toward the

commander.

"I'm sorry, General, but I'll be taking a short leave to visit the capital. Look after Sykes for me, will you?"

The commander of the eastern division unconsciously scowled. There was no way she had a good reason for this request.

"Whatever for? You just brought Abigail back here last week."

"Yes, but I'm not done yet..."

Martina, who was still holding the book, now torn to shreds, crumpled it into a ball of waste paper with a smile.

"I still have some questions for the other person involved."



When he later heard about what had unfolded at the palace, the general regretted not questioning her more thoroughly at the time. But, at the same time, he also realized that there was nothing they could have done to stop her, so he didn't let it weigh on him any longer.

44: The King Renders Judgment

The king and queen finally returned to the royal palace after their prolonged trip. Their carriage, flanked by the Royal Guard, proceeded through the grounds as the bureaucrats and soldiers who'd watched over the palace in their absence welcomed them.

"Ha ha ha! This is quite the welcome!" the king exclaimed, smiling at the cheering courtiers. Although it was customary for them to greet their ruler like this, they did so with such passion that it made the king feel as if he were genuinely popular.

The queen smiled too. "We were away for quite a long time, after all. They must have realized how much you influence them."

"Yet a week from now, I'm sure they'll be saying how suffocating it is to have me around."

"Oh, sire. You mustn't doubt your retainers' loyalty like that."

"Ha ha ha ha ha."

Looking outside the windows of their slow-moving carriage, they saw high-ranking civil and military officials rushing to greet the sovereign. The courtiers lining the road also looked deeply pleased by their return. Too pleased, in fact.

"My queen... Do you sense something is amiss?"

"I was starting to get that feeling, yes..."

The greeters were waving with far too much enthusiasm. This wasn't the welcome he'd expected for just returning from a trip. It looked more like a parade celebrating his triumphant return from war. Actually, it was akin to the welcome he would receive if he had

rushed to their aid when the castle was under siege and all hope of holding out was lost.

“Could it be because of Elliott?” the king asked.

“Let’s return to our room and get settled in before we check,” the queen suggested.

They both felt somewhat uncomfortable as their procession continued past the frenzied welcome.



When a chamberlain informed Elliott of his parents’ return, Elliott winced.

“Father and mother are back, are they? Fine! It’s come to the point where I’ll have to persuade them of Rachel’s villainy!”

He was showing a measure of resolve unthinkable in a man who’d decided just last night that the villainess in question annoyed him enough that he wanted to assassinate her.

“I realize this comes at short notice,” said the chamberlain, “but one hour from now, there is to be a trial in the audience room regarding your broken engagement.”

“I see. I’ll head there at once.”

“Very good, sir. Do you want me to push?”

“Yes, please!”

The chamberlain pushed Elliott out of the office in his wheelchair.

When Sofia informed Rachel of the royal couple’s and her parents’ return, Rachel closed her book, stretched, and yawned.

“I see. They could have taken their time and relaxed a little longer,” Rachel casually remarked, though her face seemed to say, “What a bother.”

“I think it would be unwise for you to miss the trial.”

“You have a point. Very well, then.”

Rachel changed from her indoor clothes into something more suitable for a stroll.

“Are you not too casually dressed to appear before the king?” Sofia asked.

Rachel snorted in amusement. “Having been in prison all this time, it would be strange if I showed up in formal clothes. So long as I dress well enough to meet people, that ought to be good enough.”

“And how do you really feel?”

“If I got dressed up, I wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep until they called for me.”

With that, Rachel crawled back under the covers.



Those who were involved when Elliott broke his engagement three months ago were gathered in the audience room. It was a smaller space used for things like courtesy calls and unofficial talks, as opposed to the larger audience hall, which was reserved for more important gatherings. In addition to the royal couple, Rachel, Elliott, and Margaret were also present. Then there were the prime minister and the grand duke, as well as the commander of the knights and the key cabinet ministers. The Duke and Duchess Ferguson were also in attendance. That was all.

“This is it?” Elliott murmured. He was surprised and a little disappointed by the low turnout.

Margaret was silent as she lay on the floor, gagged and rolled up in a mat.

From one look at the king’s face and at the people gathered, Rachel more or less figured out what was going on.

“Yes, Elliott. It’s not as though we’re holding a public trial,” said the king, nodding calmly from his throne. “Now then,” he continued as he looked at all those assembled. “I am told that things have been hectic ever since Elliott broke off his engagement, so I’d like to end that here and now.”

The key retainers murmured their approval. The grand duke looked particularly relieved.

“Well then, father, allow me to explain the reason I deemed it necessary to terminate my engagement!”

This was the moment Elliott had been waiting for, and he came out with guns blazing. Or rather, he tried to, but the king fired before Elliott could even unholster his weapon.

“No, it doesn’t matter.”

“Huh? Say what?”

The king rested his elbow on the arm of his throne and cupped his cheek in the palm of his hand as he repeated, “I’m telling you, it doesn’t matter.”

“But... Huh? How can you say it doesn’t matter? Are we not gathered here to debate exactly that?”

“There’s nothing to debate. I’ve long since heard all the details.” The corners of the king’s mouth rose as he glanced at his son. “Did you think I was simply idling my days away at the hot springs?”

That was exactly what he’d done.

“Even as I was giving my stomach time to recover, soaking in the healing waters, we were gathering and analyzing information.”

His subordinates had done that.

The king sat up straight, adjusting the position of his legs. “The reason I’ve gathered all of you here is to inform you of the decision I’ve made regarding my heir.”

Elliott was stunned into silence, but then he hurriedly objected.

“W-Wait, father! How can you not care about the reason I, a prince, broke off my engagement?!”

“Perhaps I should say that I’ve stopped caring in the three months since.”

The king fixed his gaze on Elliott.

“To tell you the truth, I had already discovered all I needed to know about your infantile games two weeks after it happened. It was a simple matter to speak to all the other parties involved and verify what really happened. Miss Rachel never bullied anyone. Without that justification, your breaking off the engagement and everything you’ve done since is all groundless.”

“No! You’re wrong! You have to be!” Elliott insisted.

“Just listen! Once we had confirmed all that, the Fergusons came to meet us at the hot springs. We began discussing how we could settle this without causing a stir, but...things got too out of hand for that.”

The king looked over to his chamberlains, and they wheeled in a wagonload of paperwork.

“Elliott. The mountain on your left is the reports I received from the government office, cabinet ministers, and relevant departments. The one on the right is the reports summarizing what the agents I dispatched were able to gather. And in the center, twice the size of the other two combined, are the status reports that Miss Rachel’s own agents sent to her father. They are so excellently produced that the duke was able to keep abreast of the situation in the capital as if he were here himself.”

The king glared harshly at Elliott.

“So, where are your reports?”

Elliott had no response.

“Generally, when I’m away, the government office manages our communications, saving you the need to check with me before dealing with trivial issues. But this was a major incident, one where you disposed of your fiancée—the one we had chosen to be queen. Shouldn’t you have explained your position?”

“W-Well...” Elliott cleared his throat and feebly replied, “I meant to turn them all in later...”

“Don’t talk like a child who’s left his homework to pile up.”

The king took a document that a fourth chamberlain presented to him on a tray.

“This is a summary of all the incidents you and your people have caused since you broke your engagement and the effects they’ve had. There were so many that it took a lot of hard work to find them all.”

His subordinates had done that as well.

“If you read this, you’ll see how behind you were on your work. You would waste resources harassing Miss Rachel, and then when she struck back, you’d be in no condition to work. Again and again.”

“That’s because of Rachel!” Elliott argued.

“Rachel was almost always reacting on the fly to something you initiated. Even when she hatched some scheme herself, she directed others to carry it out, then went on reading, napping, and indulging her hobbies. It’s not fair, I’m so jealous. She was never occupied with dealing with you.”

It seemed even the king wasn’t aware that Rachel had been spending her time writing homoerotic novels.

“How much trouble do you think you caused for the rest of the palace, neglecting your duties to go after Miss Rachel?” the king asked. “Weren’t there more important things for you to be doing than trying to force a concession out of her?”

The king’s eyes narrowed.

“You lack the talent for statecraft and the ability to prioritize. That much is clear from all the reports. Do you understand how these three months of chaos you caused have inconvenienced the rest of the palace? None of the courtiers or nobility trust you in the slightest at this point.”

He flipped through the document he was holding.

“They were tormented with noise late at night on several occasions and were forced to clean up the mess left by the counterattacks you suffered. You also interrupted the knights’ schedules by using them at your own whim, and you caused Miss Evans to go on a rampage that resulted in many injuries and considerable damage to equipment. And, on top of all that, not only did the Fergusons complain, but even the houses that oppose them sent me severe condemnations of your actions. You’re not even in a position to direct policy yet, and you’ve already turned every noble faction against you? How do you even manage that?”

Trying to stop a strip show was one way of doing it.

“To be honest, I never thought you were *this* incompetent. Miss Rachel was chosen to be your fiancée to augment your shortcomings, but not only did you fail to seek her help, you tried to get rid of her because you didn’t like her. If you were the son of a count, I could see you marrying for love. But a king isn’t allowed that luxury.”

“F-Father...” Elliott stammered, glancing to the side. “Then, when you married mother—”

“Don’t interrupt me!” the king shouted.

“No, I was just wondering. If you didn’t marry mother for—”

“Don’t try to change the subject!”

“Right back at you!”

Once he'd forcefully ceased Elliott's current line of questioning, the king rose from his throne.

"Both of my sons leave much to be desired as rulers. On that point, Miss Rachel—who has an awful personality but is excellent otherwise—will be indispensable to the next sovereign."

"Whose personality are you saying is a disaster?" Rachel asked.

"Moving on!" the king loudly interjected.

Rachel tried again. "Hello? I'm asking you a question."

"If you say you cannot take Rachel as your wife, then I will name your younger brother Raymond as the crown prince."

"Hey! Hey!" Rachel called.

"But father!" Elliott whined.

"Would you both stop ignoring me?"

"The decision is already made," the king declared.

"The rubies in your crown are so pretty," Rachel said. "Maybe I'll pluck them out and take them home with me."

"Stop that!" The king slapped Rachel's hand away. "Raymond! Come in here!"

Everyone turned to look at the door. As his name was called, the second prince...did not enter.

"Hm?"

The guard next to the door fidgeted awkwardly at the sudden attention and headed out into the hall to check.

"Um, His Highness hasn't come..." the guard informed him.

"I called him in advance! Where is Raymond? Augh, why must both of my sons be like this..."

"Father, I'm right here," Raymond called.

"Whoa! You surprised me!"

On closer inspection, a boy who looked like a younger version of Elliott was standing near the throne.

"Wh-When did you come in?!" the king asked.

"I've been here the whole time," Raymond replied.

The people in the room tried to remember...

"Oh, I get the feeling he has been here."

"Now that he mentions it, I think he's been there all along."

Raymond sniffed. "I see how little you all think of me..."

Here, making his first appearance, was the second prince.

"I've always been at court..."

This was not his first appearance, apparently.

Being a mini-Elliott, Raymond was a beautiful young boy with blond hair.

I may have to add a little boy character in the next volume of His Highness is After Me!, thought Rachel.

"Where have you been hiding him all this time?!" Rachel asked.

Surprised and dismayed by Rachel's excitement, Raymond replied, "I haven't been hiding at all. I always stand beside my brother during official events, but judging by the look on your face, you don't remember me."

"I'm sorry. Not only did I not recognize your face, I didn't even remember you existed at all."

"I'm impressed that you can come right out and say that about someone you really shouldn't."

In an attempt to regain some dignity, the king loudly cleared his throat and asked his stealthy second son, "Raymond, would you be willing to marry Rachel and inherit the throne?"

The pubescent fourteen-year-old boy responded immediately.

"Of course!" His eyes sparkled, and he thrust out his chest with pride. "Because of my older brother, I never expected to have the chance, but if that's what you want from me, then I'll gladly be your crown prince!"

Elliott looked at his brother in disbelief. "Raymond, you were aiming for the throne?! I thought the only good thing about you was that you don't leave much of an impression."

"Brother, that's not a good thing."

Raymond placed his hand over his heart.

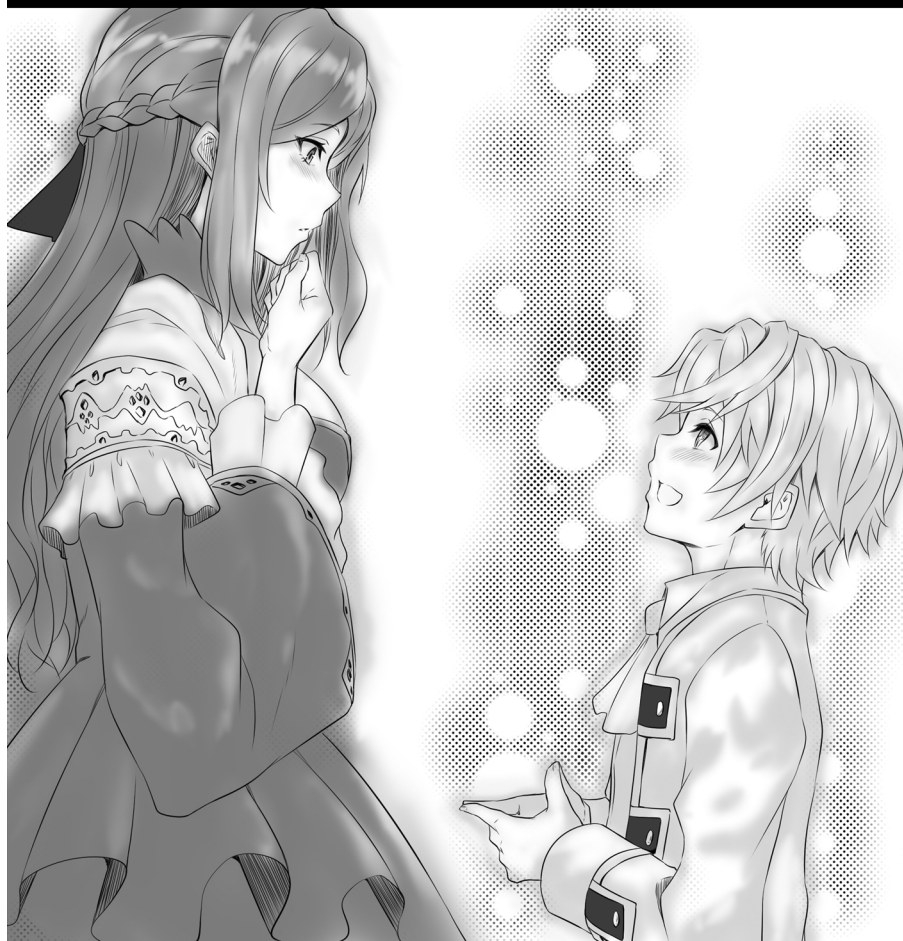
"To be honest with you, I care no more for the throne than I do about tomorrow's weather, but if it means I can marry someone as amazing as Rachel, I'll put up with the position that comes with her!"

"That position is the important part, okay?!" the king objected, taking exception to his son's outrageous statement.

"Buddy, you want to marry *that*?!" Elliott jeered, drowning his father out. "Do you have any idea what kind of hell you're getting yourself into?!"

Raymond had a dreamy look in his eyes as he ignored his brother's warning.

"Because I have so little presence, my personal maid forgets to serve me at teatime, and even when I call her, she ignores me. It's taught me how exciting it is to be treated coldly by a pretty big-sister type! Rachel's pretty, and she has big breasts, and she's cool, and she has big breasts... She's just the best! I want her to ignore me forever. To think, she'd forgotten I exist entirely. Ohh, she's so marvelous!"



“Get it together, Raymond!” Elliott cried. “She’s not cool. She’s just not interested in people! And don’t lump a devil like Rachel in with your brusque maid, okay?! Don’t think that just because you’re able to handle a little plum wine that you can chug a mug of distilled liquor so strong you could set it on fire!”

“Have no fear, brother!” Raymond thrust out his not-so-muscular chest with confidence. “My tutors always said I’m a boy whom ‘you teach the first thing, and he’s convinced he knows the tenth!’”

“That’s what worries me!”

The king leaned over and whispered in the queen’s ear, “Hey, I know it’s a little late at this point, but I’m not seeing much hope for the future regardless of who we name as crown prince.”

“Yes, it’s much too late,” the queen replied, hiding her mouth with her fan. “But that’s what we have Rachel for, right?”

The king clapped his hands to draw everyone’s attention.

“Now then, with Miss Rachel’s engagement to Elliott broken, she will now be engaged to my second son, Raymond. I am also officially recognizing Raymond as crown prince. Elliott will become a subject of the state and be given a new title, that of the Count of Leaflane!”

“No!” Elliott groaned.

The title the king mentioned was one traditionally given to nobility, but while the domain held historical significance, it was not especially prosperous. It might have even had less financial power than some wealthy baronies. In all honesty, it wasn’t meant to be given out on its own. It was more often an extra title given to a grand duke or an award given to a member of the royal family in place of a pension.

“Father! You make it sound like I’m withdrawing from public life!” Elliott complained.

“I’m not making it *sound* like you are. That’s exactly what’s happening, you imbecile! I can’t leave someone who has a grudge against the next administration with the power to instigate a rebellion. You caused enough of a scene to get yourself disinherited, so be grateful I’m leaving you with an honorary title at all.”

“But!”

“Then, tell me,” the king said, leaning in as Elliott objected. “Do you have it in you to curry favor with Miss Rachel and convince her to marry you? You broke off your engagement, repeatedly harassed her, and even tried to assassinate her last night, I’m told. That’s all the negatives you already have against you. It would take a gargantuan effort for you to win her approval at this point. You understand that, right?”

“Guh?!”

It was already unthinkable for Elliott to cast aside Margaret and go crawling back to Rachel.

“And one more thing, Elliott, since you seem to be forgetting...”

As Elliott stood there, speechless, the king unsealed a dark chapter of their history.

“When you were young, you got into a fight about something trivial and someone clobbered you into submission with rocks. That was Miss Rachel. The queen fell in love when she saw the excessive retaliation Rachel managed to pull off despite only defending herself, you see. She went to the duke and had him take responsibility for your injuries by forcing him to get the two of you engaged.”

Elliott muttered, “Could it be that the one who bludgeoned my cousin, the Count of Globnar, with a club was...?”

“That was also Miss Rachel.”

“Then, the one who threw rocks at me with a smile as I was drowning in the pond was...”

“Now that’s just your victim complex, Your Highness,” Rachel protested. “I wasn’t smiling at all. I wanted to finish up that boring task and go eat dessert.”

“Killing me was a boring task to you?!” Elliott cried.

“My, how rude. I’m not the sort of person who derives pleasure from murder. I wanted to snuff you out quickly and head off to the buffet, but you just wouldn’t drown, and I didn’t know what to do. Honestly, I don’t know what I would have done to you if I’d missed out on the cherry cheesecake as a result.”

“Your priorities are all messed up!”

“I’d rather not hear that from you after you failed to keep your own priorities straight at work, Your Highness.”

Interrupting their bickering, the king asked, “So, what will it be, Elliott? Are you going to retire quietly? Or take another chance with Miss Rachel?”

“I, um... I...”

The memories of what had befallen him long ago and of his struggles over the past three months flitted through Elliott’s mind. He rose from his wheelchair, only to fall on his face in anguish.

“I humbly accept your offer to become the Count of Leaflane...”
He was a broken man.

“Now then, that takes care of Elliott...”

The king turned his eyes toward Margaret. The baron’s daughter was squirming around on the floor like a caterpillar. They’d tied her up like this after she’d gone straight to the royal couple’s carriage in order to make the case for Elliott’s actions. Even after that, she’d kept on shouting, so they’d had to gag her too.

At the king's signal, a chamberlain behind Margaret removed the gag from her mouth.

"Bweh?! Hey, Your Majesty, isn't this a little much?! I know you're the king and all, but..."

"If you won't silence yourself," the king warned her, "we'll put a horse's bit in your mouth."

"I'll be quiet."

Once Margaret, who'd been flailing about a moment ago, settled down, the king started questioning her.

"Now then, Miss Poisson. Can you tell me what things are important for a prince?"

Margaret tilted her head to the side as she thought.

"Umm... His face?"

"Anything else?" the king asked.

"Err... Money?"

"Anything else?"

"There's more?! Uh, uhm... If he has a horse, it should be white."

The king looked back to the others.

"As you can see, because this girl was raised as a commoner, she lacks the proper education for a noble."

"It sounded like there were bigger problems to me," the prime minister mumbled.

Ignoring the prime minister, the king pointed at Margaret. "As the cause of this uproar, I cannot simply let you go free. That is why we have decided to place you in the service of an influential noble indefinitely so that you can learn proper decorum."

"Whuh?! That's all?"

Margaret was shocked. After seeing what had happened to Elliott, she'd been worried about what the king would do to someone who was practically a commoner like her. Hardy as a weed though she was, she could see she was in serious trouble.

"Yes. I've already talked to Duke Ferguson about it. He'll assign you to his daughter for the time being."

The audience mulled over the king's words.

When Margaret realized what it meant, she hollered, "Wait, that's Rachel! You used a bunch of pretty words, but you're really just giving me to Rachel as her plaything, aren't you?!"

"What are you talking about?" the king asked. "It seems she has every intent to teach you manners too."

"The way you just said that, it sounds like it's just an extra thing?! Her main goal is to use me as her toy, isn't it?!"

The king sighed. "Yes, you're right. Perhaps it's best to come out and say these things clearly."

"What?"

“Well, after what Elliott’s done, just slapping him down isn’t going to be enough to satisfy Miss Rachel, you see? Which is why we have decided to offer you up to her as a human sacrifice.”

“Saying it clearly doesn’t make everything better! I’m a minor, okay? If you’re gonna reeducate me, or offer me as a human sacrifice, you need parental permission! Mom would never let this happen to me!”

Hearing that, the king gave the signal.

“Pardon me for speaking despite my low station.” Rachel’s maid Sofia, who was standing by the wall, stepped forward. “Baron Poisson and his wife have already given their permission for the young lady to apprentice with us to learn manners.”

“That can’t be right! Mom’s not so stupid she wouldn’t realize what that means!” Margaret protested.

And what about her dad?

“That is why she entrusted me with a letter as proof,” Sofia replied, pulling out an envelope. “Ahem, ‘To my dearest Margaret. His Majesty came to us with an offer for you to apprentice at the Ducal House of Ferguson where you will learn their manners. We weren’t sure what to do at first, but we decided to accept.’”

“No way?! That has to be a lie!”

“Because if I sign the paperwork, they’ve promised to get me platinum tickets to a premium box seat at Adam’s latest show. I couldn’t pass that up, right? So long, and work hard on your lessons.’ That is what it says.”

Once Sofia finished reading the letter, Margaret stopped rolling around and started slamming her head against the floor.

“Of course she’d say yes to that! It’s a show by *the* Adam! I’d gladly sell two or three of my own daughters for that chance! Wait, if she sold me to get those tickets, then they oughta belong to meeee!!! Let me go for at least one daaaaaay!!!”

“You understand that you will be apprenticing with them, then?” the king asked.

“Yeah! But I don’t wannaaaa! I get why, but I don’t wanna goooo!”

Margaret suddenly stopped and glanced at Rachel. Rachel had her arms spread wide, the biggest smile on her face.

“Welcome!” she trilled.

“I really don’t wanna goooooo!!!”

Grand Duke Vivaldi breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s all over now, isn’t it?”

The prime minister looked relieved too.

“Yes, that’s right...”

"I won't lose Enrique again?"

"No, you won't."

"I won't have a monkey eating my apples?"

"No, you won't."

The two men hugged each other, crying tears of joy.

"What happened to you, uncle?" the king asked.

None of that had made it into the reports.

"Hmm, I'd say it all worked out in the end," the king remarked, satisfied. That is, until he sensed someone behind him.

"Robert."

"Hm?" The king turned to find Duchess Somerset and Countess Marlborough waiting behind him.

"Why, aunt. I apologize for not coming to give my regards sooner."

"That is not what is important," Duchess Somerset replied. She was holding a teacher's pointer. "Robert. We need to talk out back about some of the issues with your decisions, your directions, and your ability to communicate."

"Wait, listen! There were reasons!" the king pleaded.

"We need to talk. Out back!" The duchess swung her pointer. "Or would you prefer to lower your pants here?"



The king had rendered judgment, but the audience room was still noisy, so Rachel watched from a window outside, an ephemeral smile on her face.

Is this all finally over now? If everything returns to normal after this, it will be. Beyond that, things will turn out however they turn out.

Rachel slowly took a step backward, trying to avoid the notice of the noisy people.

My role here is done. So...

Quietly leaving from the terrace, Rachel smiled as she turned to look back at the audience room once more.

I'm free...to go where I want now, right?

"Oh, enough of this. Rachel, let's leave them to it and go home. Rachel?"

Emerging from the chaos in the hall, the duke called his daughter, intending to just go home already. It was Rachel's first time out of jail in three months, so she had to be missing the house. Or so he thought.

"Rachel?"

There was no one where Rachel had been standing, just the lace curtains, quietly swaying in the wind that blew through the large,

open window.

“Rachel!” the duke called.

“Mmnggh.”

Rachel turned over in her sleep.

“Come on, Rachel! Wake up!”

“Ngh... I was sleeping so well too. What is it?”

Duke Ferguson rattled the iron bars. “No, not, ‘What is it?’! Get up, Rachel!”

Even though everyone was still making a ruckus, the girl at the center of it all had slipped away on them. The duke had hurriedly gone in search of her, only to find her back in the prison, sound asleep.

What is she thinking? he thought angrily as he looked at her sleeping face.

“Why are you back in the dungeon now that everything is sorted out?! Get out here at once!”

“I don’t want to,” Rachel replied, cutting him off.

“Wha...”

Rachel savored the smoothness of her bedding as she pulled the comforter over her head and dove deep underneath.

“I’m enjoying a romantic rendezvous with the one I love in a place where no one can come between us right now. It’s boorish of you to interfere.”

“A rendezvous?” The duke looked sideways at his daughter, who was saying some strange things.

Sofia calmly interjected, “Young mistress, would the one you love happen to be your comforter?”

“Yesss... We’re madly in love... Ngh.”

“Enough nonsense about loving your bedding! Get out here at once!” the duke demanded.

“It’s the truth!” Rachel asserted, her voice muffled by the comforter. “I was sleeping on cushions at first, but after switching to a bed, I realized something. A comforter really does feel better.”

“Well, of course it does! That’s obvious!”

“Now that I think about it, comforters have been comforting me since the day I was born.”

“That’s what they do!”

“When I was tired or sad, they gently embraced me without a word.”

“Because they can’t talk.”

Rachel rolled over in bed, ignoring her father’s listless retorts.

“So, there you have it. In these three months, I’ve become reacquainted with the value of a good comforter. I don’t have time for

lessons to become queen. Please, don't interfere in our lovey-dovey time together."

"You just got used to slacking, didn't you?!" the duke cried.
"Sofia. Say something to this foolish daughter of mine!"

At the duke's request, Sofia looked at the bed. "Young mistress, are you happy like this?"

"Yep," Rachel replied.

Sofia stared into space for a while, thinking, and said, "I see. That is good to hear." Then she stopped thinking.

"Why are you accepting it?!" the duke questioned. "Would you try to wake her up properly?!"

"The young mistress's happiness is my happiness," Sofia explained.

"Your maids act all talented, but they're actually useless?! Hey, Rachel! Get up!"

"Ngh."

The duke turned to the prison guard, who was watching from a distance.

"You, drag her out of there! Unlock the door!"

"Uh, yeah..." The prison guard scratched his head awkwardly.
"About that..."

"What?"

"When the young lady returned, she said, 'I'll be managing the lock from inside from now on,' and confiscated the key..."

"And you didn't think that was strange?! What kind of prison lets the inmate manage the locks?!"

"Uh, I did think it was strange, but..." The prison guard looked away. He had the look of a man who'd come to terms with the world.
"I figured arguing with the young lady was useless..."

"Why is everyone around Rachel like this?!" the duke lamented.
Something tapped on the duke's knee. Looking down, he saw his daughter's beloved pet monkey offering him an apple.

"I'll give you this, so make me look good by letting this go, okay?"

"Seriously, what is going on around Rachel?!"

With the shouts of her father and those trying to mollify him as background noise, Rachel wrapped herself in the warm comforter and drifted off to sleep with a contented smile on her face.

It looked like the young lady was going to be able to keep living the slow life in prison a little while longer.

45: The Prince Learns the Limits of His Power

The garden parties held periodically in another castle on the capital's outskirts were for deepening ties with other families, but they

were a bore for the children. They would be on their best behavior when next to their parents, but once the adults started conspiring together, they were generally left to their own devices. The kids would get together and begin exploring the gardens or talking among themselves. And just as the adults had factions, the children had communities of their own too.

The group centered around six-year-old Elliott was the largest faction among the children at today's event. Elliott was the first prince, after all, and even children could understand that that made him special. On top of that, a group of older boys, old enough to understand the significance of Elliott's position, were protecting him. Naturally, the other sons of the nobility showed deference to the prince, so Elliott strode around like he owned the place.

As they left the patio where the party was being held, the second son of a marquess, who was following half a step behind Elliott, made a proposal.

"How about it, Your Highness? Would you like to go explore the forest to the east?"

There was a small forest on the east side of the event site—more of a copse than a forest, really. The adults could walk across it in two minutes. Still, it was an excellent spot for stimulating the boys' sense of adventure.

"Hmm, yes, that does sound good..."

Elliott was just about to agree to the idea, when a girl with chocolate-colored hair walked past in front of him, cutting him off. She was roughly the same age as Elliott and was wearing a one-piece apron dress. She had a plate in her hands, and it looked like she was on her way to get food.

What's her problem?! Elliott thought, irate.

Elliott was important. He was a prince. He was walking around with his "vassals," so what gave her the right to cut him off like that?! Now, if it had been something urgent, Elliott would have understood, but she was just on the way to get food. That being the case, she should have waited for him to pass or, at least, bowed her head before she went by.

"Hey, you!" Elliott called after her.

She ignored him.

"Hey, you there! Are you listening to me?!"

Elliott was enraged by the way she ignored him and kept going, so one of the others nearby hurriedly went and stopped her. When he brought her before the prince, she seemed to be in a bad mood, but Elliott was no less angry.

"Hey, you! What is the meaning of this, ignoring me when I'm talking to you?!"

“I’m terribly sorry. I couldn’t hear you,” she responded, as if nothing had happened, then curtsied.

She looked to be about his age, and because of the way she spoke and acted, she had a mature air about her, becoming a nobleman’s daughter. Elliott resented the way she looked more “adult” than him. He felt as if she was making a fool of him.

“Do you think ‘I couldn’t hear you’ is going to cut it after you ignored a prince?!”

His followers loudly disparaged the girl.

“Yeah, yeah!”

“It’s rude to say you didn’t notice His Highness!”

The girl, who seemed like a nasty piece of work, bowed her head once more.

“I really am incredibly sorry about that. They’ve started serving the cherry cheesecake, and there are only a limited number of slices available for a short time, so I felt I simply must secure mine as soon as possible. That’s why I was automatically filtering out any low-priority information unrelated to that.”

“R-Right...” Elliott stuttered.

She’d given some sort of complicated explanation, but the only part that Elliott had understood was “cherry cheesecake.” Well, it didn’t matter. He didn’t want to admit that he didn’t understand, so he decided to change tactics.

“Hm... I see. I’ll allow you to come on our adventure. Consider it an honor.”

Elliott was positively smug. He was allowing her to join him on an adventure when normally only his “vassals” could go. This haughty brat was bound to be grateful for it. However, much to Elliott’s surprise, the girl declined, looking displeased.

“I’ll pass, thank you. As I already told you, I am in a hurry for cherry cheesecake. I’m not so bereft of things to do that I can get involved in nonessential tasks. Now, I bid you good day.”

Her words were polite, but their intention wasn’t.

Elliott, nonplussed by her attitude, questioned if this was really happening, then got angry at the insolence of it all.

“How dare you! I’m offering you the honor of joining us, you know?!”

“Do take care on your journey,” she said. “I haven’t the slightest, most minuscule interest in going on ‘adventures.’ I’ll be praying for your success while smacking my lips over in the sweets corner. Ta-ta.” She punctuated the last word with a smile.

“What was that smile for?! Hey, wait, listen to me!” Elliott commanded.

He pressed her for a response, but she paid him no mind and tried

to go on her way. Though her words were ostensibly polite, her actions totally rejected his princely status. She was a model example of superficial courtesy.

I can't put up with this any longer. Not that I've been putting up with it at all, but still. I can't stand this girl!

"Wh-Why, that little!"

Elliott snapped and threw a rock at the girl's back.

Bonk!

When the stone hit the back of her head, she stopped.

"That's for being rude to a prince!" Elliott asserted. "Have you learned your lesson?!"

As Elliott crowed and his cronies obsequiously cheered, she rubbed the spot where the rock had struck her.

I'm not gonna be satisfied until I make her apologize to my face.

Elliott approached to grab her by the shoulder...

Pow!

Having discerned his location by the sound of his footsteps, she turned and sucker punched him in the face, sending him flying.

"Gyaaah!"

"Your Highness?!"

Several of Elliott's followers rushed to his side and hurriedly helped him to his feet. The others surrounded the girl, albeit cautiously since she'd just clobbered the prince, and tried to use their numbers to hold her down.

"Why you...! Aaagh?!" The third son of a count attempted to grab her arm, but she caught him by the wrist, then swiped his legs out from under him. He tumbled to the ground.

"You wanna fight...?! Gwogh?!" The eldest son of a marquess took a swing at her, but she ducked and hit him with an uppercut that made him fall like a sack of potatoes.

"What's with her?!"

"Oh, crap! What the hell?!"

Before we even address the size difference, her punches were way too heavy for a girl about the same age as six-year-old Elliott.

"Stop, stop, it hurts!"

Not only that, but she was vicious. She went for the finishing blow and repeatedly kicked her downed victims.

She's crazy... Elliott thought.

Not afraid to indulge in a little overkill, the boys felt like they'd stumbled across some unidentified demonic beast that had assumed the form of an intense little girl.

"Damn it! Beat her to a pulp!" Elliott commanded, holding his aching nose and fighting back tears.

In response, the boys...did not rush the girl. In fact, they did

nothing. Honestly, they'd already tried violence with her, and five of them were now sprawled on the ground. Plus, the girl held her fighting stance and occasionally punched the air to make a point.

What now? Elliott wondered.

Since she looked to be about Elliott's age, most of the boys were likely older than her. They were all still growing, so they had a height advantage, but none of them could envision a scenario where they came at her swinging and actually won.

The second son of a count, who was helping Elliott stand, saw his fellow comrades' confusion and shouted, "Go and get our big brothers! We'll let them teach her a lesson for hurting His Highness!"

"Oh, yeah!"

"Th-That makes sense."

It hadn't occurred to them in the heat of the moment that calling for backup was an option, and an incredibly appealing one at that. Having seen some sliver of hope, the boys surrounding the girl clung to it and acted immediately. They ran off to the main event site to get the older boys. They left behind Elliott, the count's second son, and a few others who lay collapsed on the ground.

The girl cracked her knuckles as she approached the count's son.

"Deliberately decreasing your own numbers... You must be awfully confident."

"Huh? What? Hey, somebody... Aaargh?!"



When the uninjured boys who'd gone running for help returned with three older boys, the girl had already finished getting her last kicks in and was leaving the scene of violence. When she saw the reinforcements arriving, she clicked her tongue.

"Wh-Why you little...!" When the eldest of the boys saw the tragedy in front of him, particularly Elliott's battered state, he was overcome with a panic greater than any anger he might have felt. They had an obligation to protect Elliott, after all. They'd been brought together as Elliott's bodyguards, but one little girl had trounced them, and the prince himself was all beaten up. He could say that he wasn't there when it happened, but that would only make the adults more upset.

"Damn it! Beat the stuffing out of her!" the eldest boy barked.

"But Steve, she's a girl..."

His comrades were still saying some naive nonsense and acting indecisive, so he bellowed, "You all think we're going to get off scot-free after we let this happen to His Highness?! It doesn't matter if she's a girl. We need to clobber her and make her apologize to His Highness, or the adults are gonna be pissed!"

Steve was the most mature of the group and grown enough to consider just how bad of a position they were in. However, he was still just a ten-year-old boy, which meant he wasn't quite grown enough to stay alert while he persuaded the other boys.

"Well? Do you get what I'm saying?!" Steve asked.

"Steve!"

"What?"

"Behind you!"

"Huh...?"

He turned around in time to see the girl, who'd gotten very close at some point, swing a long, thin pole down at him.

"She got Globnar!"

"Aaaah?!"

The girl had clobbered the eldest boy with a stick she got somewhere. The other two boys who tried to stop her met the same fate and joined him on the ground. With that, the backup they'd gone to procure had been wiped out.

Neither larger numbers nor older boys had won this for them. She was just one little girl, while they had more than ten boys, and all of them were older than her. Yet despite their apparent advantage, they saw no way of winning.

"What now? What are we supposed to do?!" one of Elliott's followers asked.

They helped the less injured boys get up, but they couldn't figure out their next move. The group centered around the prince were known for running amok, but they were revealing themselves to be indecisive. Still, they now knew not to take their eyes off the girl while talking, so they'd grown a little, at least.

Some of his followers helped Elliott to his feet, and he gritted his teeth as he assessed the situation.

"How did just one girl do all this?"

Since his cronies couldn't lay a hand on her, Elliott thought until he had a flash of inspiration.

"Hey, everyone, throw rocks at her!"

He was suggesting that more than ten boys attack one little girl with ranged weapons. People had a way of losing their consciences when they found themselves backed into a corner.

The boys followed Elliott's order and started picking up nearby rocks and throwing them at the girl. Not even she could fight back against this, so she backed away. When they saw her retreat, Elliott and the boys pushed their advantage and kept on throwing.

"Yes! We can do this!"

"We can win!"

Seeing that she was up against a number of opponents—a difference the boys should have been ashamed of even if they were to win—and that they were getting carried away because of that, she finally ran away.

“We did it!”

“Now corner her and make her apologize to the prince!”

If she’d lost the will to fight, now they just had to cut her off and force her to surrender. That was what they thought as they chased her, rocks in hand, but she climbed a tree.

It was hard throwing upward, and try as they might, they couldn’t reach her. They should have had her cornered, but there was nothing they could do about it in this situation.

Elliott and the boys gathered around the bottom of the tree and looked up. The girl was up in the branches, perhaps plotting a counterattack, as she glared down at them with a scowl on her adorable face.

The boys started discussing their countermeasures.

“What do we do? Our rocks aren’t reaching her.”

“We could wait, but there’s no telling how long she’ll stay up there.”

Just as they were thinking that they didn’t want this to drag on, a snapping sound came from up above.

“Hm?”

They looked up to see the girl hanging from a thick branch and kicking a lower branch with all her might. Before they even had time to wonder why, the thin branch fell right into the middle of their group, and the rather impressive hive that was attached to it, which had to be about twenty centimeters wide, unleashed a massive swarm of wasps.

“Aaaaahh?!”

“Heeeelp!”

The wasps must have assumed that the people gathered around the hive were the culprits, because they went after Elliott and the boys, not the girl up in the tree. Mad with rage, they chased the boys left and right. The boys fled in all directions, but the unlucky ones still hollered with pain each time they were stung. It was pandemonium.

Elliott, having somehow managed to escape the scene, sat down next to the pond. Everything had happened so fast that he didn’t know where he was now or what had become of his cronies.

“I thought I was a goner...”

Just as he was thinking that he didn’t even have the will left to stand, a shadow fell over him.

“Huh?”

Elliott, thoroughly exhausted, looked up to see the girl who’d climbed the tree. She was leaning back, and her foot was raised.

“What? Gwuh?!”

She hoofed him in the chest, and Elliott fell. He tried to get up, but she planted another kick on his butt. He fell again, rose to all fours, took another kick in the butt, and fell headfirst into the pond.

“Bwarghlarghlargh!”

He tried to scream “Somebody help me,” but all that came out were a lot of bubbles as the muddy water flooded into his mouth. He couldn’t tell if his head was facing up or down. He struggled like mad, but water kept getting into his nose and mouth. It rushed in to replace the air he’d exhaled without meaning to. With his lungs full of water, Elliott could no longer even scream as he thrashed about.

It’s hopeless... he thought.

“Bwah!” The moment he sensed his impending death, Elliott’s head surged out of the water. His field of vision suddenly cleared, and he could see the bright light of the sun once more. It was pure coincidence, though, that Elliott’s head had ended up above the surface as he flailed about, drowning.

Coughing and sputtering, he cried, “S-Somebody!”

Now that his head was above water, his lungs could finally suck in all the oxygen they craved. His chest swelled with air, and he called for help in a nasal voice in between spitting up mouthfuls of water.

The shore looked so far away. He’d ended up drifting as he struggled, and even his childish eyes could tell it was quite a distance to where the girl was standing. He flailed his arms and legs, trying to head back there somehow, but the sleeves of his shirt and overcoat got all tangled up, making it incredibly hard to move his arms. Even so, he’d almost made it to shore, when...

Pow!

Elliott’s vision shook. The moment he realized that something had hit him, the spot on his forehead where it had struck felt hot.



“Huh? What?”

Elliott didn't understand what was happening, but as he kept struggling toward shore, the answer came flying a few seconds later.

Right after the girl on the shore swung her arm, another little rock smacked him in the head. She was throwing stones to keep him from reaching land.

“Aaaah?!”

If Elliott fled into the center of the pond, she would let him get away, but any closer to shore and she would send rocks flying. Her aim was precise, and she always hit her target.

“E-Eeeeeek!”

He was helpless, but he couldn't give up on reaching the shore. Even if he were to stay where he was, his little legs couldn't reach the bottom.

While he was desperately trying not to drown, Elliott's gang gathered around the girl on the shore, all of them in a sorry state. They begged her to spare Elliott, but she didn't listen to a word of it. She eyed Elliott, toying with one of the rocks in her hand.

As he watched the adults rush over, Elliott's consciousness gradually faded away.



The scene around the pond had turned into bedlam. While the maids treated the bloodied boys, a number of chamberlains leapt into the pond to save the drowning prince. No one was heavily wounded, but they all needed first aid followed by a doctor's visit, so the adults had called all of the palace's court physicians, even the ones who were off duty.

When the king and queen arrived, having received word of what had happened, they looked around what resembled a battlefield as they listened to a report on the incident.

“So, that is what unfolded, if we are to believe Lady Rachel of the House of Ferguson, the only one who's been able to keep a level head.”

“Hmm...”

Even though they were only young boys who had no decision-making abilities, it was hard to believe that more than ten of them had decided to gang up on a little girl over an accidental breach of decorum. But then again, they'd lost to her and nearly gotten the prince killed. This was beyond a mere failure of education—for both Elliott's group and the girl.

The king's head hurt as he tried to figure out how he ought to interpret this.

Over by the side of the pond, Duke Ferguson, who'd gone quite pale, was holding his daughter, the young lady at the center of this calamity. No matter how the chamberlains had pleaded with her, she wouldn't stop throwing rocks at Elliott, so her father had grabbed her and stopped it himself.

The young girl, who was as adorable as a doll, had no expression on her face, and with the way her father was holding her, she looked as though she actually were a doll. However, the king shuddered as he saw the blatant hostility and murderous intent in her eyes.

The duke began apologizing and attempted to explain, but the king looked at the calm face of the young lady in his arms.

"Rachel, was it? Could I talk to her?"

Rachel tilted her head to the side. "Will this take long, Your Majesty?"

"Hm? What do you mean?" the king asked gently.

Six-year-old Rachel was completely serious when she replied, "They'll stop handing out the cherry cheesecake if I don't hurry, so would you mind waiting until I've been able to get some?"

The king was taken aback and didn't know how to react, but he did order a chamberlain to go get her some cake.

The queen nodded with approval. "Your Majesty," she said to her husband.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Rachel really is something."

"Well...I won't deny that..."

Not in a way I can approve of, though, thought the king.

"I've decided. Let's make Rachel Elliott's future wife," the queen said as if it was a stroke of genius.

How did she come to that conclusion in a situation like this?

The king didn't understand his wife any better than he understood the duke's young daughter, and without thinking, asked, "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. To think she could cause a scene like this and yet still be able to explain it calmly and objectively... That's not an easy thing to do."

"I'm sure it's not, but maybe she's such a child that she doesn't understand what she's done?"

The queen turned to Rachel and asked, "What do you think about the fact that you hurt Elliott, Miss Rachel?"

"I'll be executed, I suppose?" she answered. "If so, I'd like to at least have some cherry cheesecake before you cut my head off."

"What do you think, sire? Look at the courage she has to remain so calm in the face of capital punishment!"

"I'm more curious about this cherry cheesecake that young Miss

Rachel is so fixated on.”



When Elliott awoke from his deep slumber, he didn't remember the garden party. To be more precise, he remembered *something* had happened, but his recollections were fragmentary, like a dream.

Taking advantage of this, the queen introduced Rachel to him not as the culprit who'd injured him but as his newly chosen fiancée. Elliott was confused by how quickly that decision had been made, but their marriage was more than a decade off at this point, so it didn't seem like something he needed to care about.

“There you have it!” the queen assured them. “Elliott's accepted it, so give us your daughter and I'll forget all about the garden party incident.”

“You're not being reasonable!” the duke protested.

There was no way the duke could resist once the king and queen had made up their minds, especially when they were offering to overlook an incident where his daughter had brutalized the prince. They'd come ready for all possible objections, and he was in no position to oppose them when it meant his family would be declared innocent.

“What's the harm? I doubt you've found a husband for her yet anyway,” the king stated.

“Well, no, but...are you sure?” the duke asked.

“About what?”

The duke sighed and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “About the girl who did all that marrying into your family.”

Well, when he puts it that way... Wait, no, stop.

The king shook his head to dispel those thoughts. “I-I mean, it's not the sort of thing that could happen twice. Mm-hm.”

“Here's hoping...” the duke said, finally giving in.

It would still be more than a decade before the two of them caused a far greater incident.

46: The Day of Departure and Their New Lives

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was a refreshing morning, fit for the start of a journey. However, since Elliott was leaving the capital in disgrace, he couldn't help but feel a little miserable. Today was the day he would leave to take up his new position in the Leaflane domain.

“Gosh, I never thought much about the scenery here before, but when I realize I don't know when I'll ever see it again, it gets me a little emotional,” Elliott said as he looked out at the trees in the

gardens from the porte cochere.

George, who'd come to see him off, wiped a tear from his eyes. "Four months ago, I never would have thought it could come to this..."

"He he, don't cry. It's a relatively peaceful outcome, considering I lost in a struggle at court."

In Elliott's case, it wasn't even a power struggle, though.

"Still, George, is it okay for you to come see me off?" Elliott asked. "Doesn't it endanger your own position?"

It was a risky move for him to stay behind and see off someone who was essentially being sent into exile. No matter how times changed, it was always risky showing loyalty to the defeated.

"Thank you for your concern, sir, but I did at least get permission from Alexandra," George explained.

"You did, huh? I guess she's being considerate, in her own way."

"I brought a parting gift from her as well. Here it is. A picture book for you to read during your trip, some pocket money so you can buy food along the way, and a little knight doll for you to play with in the carriage."

"Does she think I'm still a child?"

Elliott refused to accept them, so George pulled out another bag in place of the gifts.

"And there's this. Honestly, I wasn't sure about offering it, though..."

"What is it?"

"It's a parting gift...from my sister."

"From Rachel?"

They both looked dubiously at the bag.

"I'd bet money there's nothing good in there," Elliott muttered.

"Yes," George agreed. "I questioned whether I should even bring it."

They looked at each other, then slowly opened the bag. Once it was clear nothing was going to jump out at them, they pulled out the objects inside one by one.

"Medical supplies?" Elliott said, confused.

"It sure looks like it," George replied.

The bag contained motion-sickness medicine, salve for wounds, herbs to stop bleeding, antibiotic ointment, absorbent cotton, triangular bandages, painkillers, and more.

"There's an awful lot of stuff for treating injuries in here!" Elliott exclaimed.

"Knowing my sister, there's definitely no good reason for it..." George surmised.

The last thing to come out was a card with a message on it that

said, "Good luck!"

"I'm not sure what to read into that..." Elliott murmured.

"Is there something wrong with the domain, or is it another problem?" George wondered.

Before they knew it, quite some time had passed since George came to see him off. Elliott couldn't keep worrying about Rachel's message, which could be read any number of ways, forever.

"See you, George," he said. "Come visit sometime, when things settle down."

"Yes, sir! Take care of yourself, Your Highness."

As George started sniffing again, Elliott got into the carriage, leaving him behind.

The knight who would be guarding Elliott climbed aboard and gave the coachman the order to drive. The coachman lowered the door bar, then hopped up into the driver's seat.

George kept on waving until Elliott's carriage had disappeared out the main gate.

"I wonder when we'll meet again?" He turned to head back toward the government office, but he stopped after just a few steps. "Hold on... Did the driver just lock the cabin from the outside?"

Once the carriage left the palace, it cut straight across town and headed out onto the highway. Elliott watched the plains roll by outside the window, and it finally sank in that he was leaving the royal capital.

"We've already come so far," he said, feeling sentimental.

The knight removed the hat she'd been wearing low over her face. "Yes, we've finally made it out here."

Taken aback by her rudeness, Elliott turned to look at who this knight was.

"Martina?!" he cried. It was the woman who'd subjected him to a night of torture in front of the dungeon just days ago. "Huh?! You're not in a department that would have assigned you to guard me, are you? Why are you here?"

With a silly laugh, Martina smiled, but there was no light in her eyes.

"Hm? Oh, the fortress I'm returning to just so happens to be in the same direction, you see? Leaflane is only a short detour, so I took the job since it was along the way."

As she smiled, she patted the palm of her hand with an all-too-familiar desk leg.

"You know, when I was asking you about your relationship with Sykes before, we only had one night, so I couldn't do everything. I was

thinking I'd like to take my time, do it properly... And that's why I traded places with your guard."

Elliott clutched the door handle, desperately pulling and pushing on it, but the door showed no sign of opening.

"Hey, driver! This is an emergency! Open up!" he shouted, pounding on and kicking at the door, but he got no response.

"It's about three days to your new domain," Martina explained. "I've asked him to drive nonstop so that we won't be interrupted, but I couldn't expect an ordinary coachman to do that, so Rachel hooked me up with one of her people."

"Damn, was the medicine earlier an advance warning of this?!" Elliott's eyes teared up as he tried to pry the door open.

Martina gently put her hands on Elliott's shoulders. "Your Highness, I could only ask you about the contents of one volume that night, so try to be more talkative today, would you?" Martina plopped a stack of books down on the seat. "Look, I brought everything up to the latest volume so we could check over all of them together."

Then, leaning close to the ex-prince as his teeth chattered in terror, she grinned.

"Hee hee, let's enjoy our three days together, okay?"



Having received orders from the duke to drag Rachel out of prison somehow, Sofia reluctantly accepted the task.

"Young mistress," she called, "the master is saying that it really is time you left the dungeon."

"I'm sure he is," Rachel replied. "But I've realized something important."

"By which you mean?"

With a serious look on her face, Rachel declared, "This lifestyle really does suit me."

Sofia stared off into space for some time before saying, "That is good to hear."

"It's not good!" the duke ranted from behind Sofia. "Rachel, stop talking nonsense and get out of there!"

"Master, if you were going to come yourself, couldn't you have left me out of it?" Sofia complained.

Scowling at the impudent maid, the duke pointed at the prison. "You know Rachel better than anyone! Come up with a way to get her out of there!"

"I am not sure what to tell you, but...let us use our trump card."

Sofia didn't want to be caught in the middle of this, but as an employee, she couldn't object too strongly.

Sofia clapped hands, and two maids came in carrying a large

package.

“Hm?” Rachel watched as the maids set the package on the floor, unwrapped her, and even took the gag out of her mouth.

“Pfwah!”

“Oh, my punching bag! You came to see me?!” Rachel said excitedly.

The package was none other than that wonderfully punchable person Rachel loved so much.

Despite Rachel’s evident glee, Margaret snapped, “I told you! Don’t call me a punching bag! And don’t you have eyes?! I didn’t come here! They kidnapped me! What is wrong with you people?! Can’t you carry someone without tying them up?!”

“No, we were giving you special treatment,” Sofia claimed.

Rachel accepted this bald-faced lie with an innocent smile. “Isn’t it nice, getting special treatment?”

“No, it’s not!” Margaret hollered. “You people are treating me like an idiot, aren’t you?!”

Still rolled up in a mat, she flopped around and yelled as Sofia and the other two maids worked together and hung her from the ceiling.

“Stop it! Whaddaya think you’re doing?!” Margaret protested.

Ignoring her, Sofia bowed her head to Rachel, who was holding onto the iron bars as she watched them work.

“Look at this, young mistress. Miss Punching Bag is ready and eagerly waiting for you to come hit her.”

Rachel’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, my!”

“Who’s eagerly waiting?!” Margaret asked. “Don’t string me up like this and then start spewing rotten nonsense, okay?!”

“What do you say, young mistress?” Sofia asked. “You have yet to test your slaps and punches on her, no?”

“Hrm, you’re making it hard to resist...” Rachel muttered.

“Listen to me!” Margaret screeched. It was like she was invisible despite being central to this entire conversation.

Noticing that Rachel was being indecisive, Sofia clapped again. “And I have also invited these distinguished guests to provide their reviews of her for your benefit, young mistress.”

“Distinguished...guests?” Rachel asked.

At Sofia’s signal, a maid led in...

“Duchess Somerset and Countess Marlborough,” Sofia answered.

“Eeek!” Rachel shrieked and dove under the covers.

Margaret bounced around like crazy and screamed, “It’s the hags!!!”

“My, how rude,” Duchess Somerset remarked. “Also, a lady mustn’t raise her voice without good reason!”

“Your faces are all the reason I need!” Margaret shot back.

Sofia guided the two elderly ladies over to Margaret. “Young mistress, today I have invited two experienced individuals to talk to you about the charms of Miss Punching Bag.”

“Oh, my,” Rachel whimpered.

“Don’t come up with stupid ideas!” Margaret insisted.

Once Sofia finished bowing, Countess Marlborough nodded and lifted up Margaret’s skirt. Rachel watched on excitedly.

The duke asked Sofia, “I have some idea what you’re planning. It would be better if I left, wouldn’t it?”

“I am not concerned one way or the other,” Sofia answered, “but if you do stay to watch, I will inform your wife that ‘the master has been taking an interest in the bottoms of women younger than the young mistress.’”

The duke left.

“Rachel, are you ready?” Countess Marlborough asked. “Miss Punching Bag is—”

“You’re a teacher, aren’t you?! Learn my name already!” Margaret interjected.

“Her most charming feature is her great elasticity!” the countess finished.

“Don’t ignore me! I’m telling you that my name is Margaret Poisson!”

“She has supple skin and a bouncy bottom, but beneath all that, she possesses a punchable elasticity and a firm core. Once you’ve experienced what it’s like to hit her, I’m sure you’ll be hooked!”

“Ohhh!” Rachel moaned.

“Rachel!” Margaret snapped. “What’re you getting all excited about that description for?!”

Sofia rolled down Margaret’s panties. “Now then, let us have Duchess Somerset give her a test. Go ahead, Duchess.”

“Yes. Now then, allow me to do the honors,” the duchess said.

Margaret spat, “Hey, you hag! You’ve totally dropped the facade of doing this to educate me, haven’t you?!”

Duchess Somerset adjusted her posture, performatively removing her glove as she readied her right hand, then...

Smack!

“Owww!”

Looking down at her hand, the duchess let out a satisfied sigh, her expression that of a young maiden still full of dreams.

“Ah, truly wonderful. In my sixty years as an instructor, I’ve slapped countless bottoms, but Miss Punching Bag’s bottom is peerless! It feels so wonderful that I don’t even care about disciplining her anymore. I just want to slap her behind all day long!”

“Hey, what do you mean my butt’s peerless?! My butt is not a toy!” Margaret objected.

“Oh, why did I slap it with a sandal the other day?! This bottom is meant to be slapped barehanded! I could slap it endlessly, until my hand broke, and still have no regrets!”

“You should regret it! Is your life that cheap?! Why are you so obsessed with spanking my butt?!”

Margaret kept trying to pick a fight with the duchess, who was savoring the moment, while the countess squirmed in anticipation for her own turn.

“What do you say, young mistress? If you were to come out now, you too could slap that butt,” Sofia said encouragingly.

“Urgh...”

Rachel’s desire to hit the punching bag right away conflicted with her desire to stay in her cell. She groaned, feeling the agony of her dilemma.

Sofia kept pushing. “If you do not want her, shall I give her to the duchess?”

“No, I do! I want her! I do, but... Ohhh...”

Rachel crouched down. Perhaps the day she would give up her slow prison life was close at hand.

Sofia approached Margaret, who was still rolled up in a mat and hanging from the ceiling. “If the young mistress leaves her cell now, it will be thanks to you,” she whispered.

“You think I care?! Do something about these psychos!” Margaret demanded.

“Nothing can be done, I am afraid.”



One of the chamberlains rushed over to Raymond, who was sitting on the terrace with an untouched cup of tea in front of him.

“Your Highness!” the chamberlain called.

“Did you get a response from Rachel?!”

Raymond had sent a letter to Rachel in prison three days ago requesting a visit, but she still hadn’t replied. Now that he was to be her partner, he’d written to express his feelings and to ask to see her alone. Perhaps she was still confused from having switched fiancés so suddenly. Raymond had already procured a ring so that he could propose to her properly. He was reworking himself to suit her, but would she accept his feelings?

Raymond eagerly reached out to accept the reply. However, the chamberlain was carrying nothing.

“Wh-What is it?” Raymond asked, staring at the chamberlain’s hands.

The chamberlain awkwardly reported, "Your Highness... Um, about the letter you sent Miss Rachel..."

"Yes?"

"It was found in the kitchen after the maid you asked to deliver it forgot about it and left it there."

Raymond fell out of his chair.

"Your Highness?!" the chamberlain grunted, helping him up.

"Your Highness, please, pull yourself together!"

"Heh heh heh... I waited for what felt like an eternity for her response. No wonder it seemed to be taking so long."

"I'm so terribly sorry! The maid responsible for this will be—"

"Yes, see to it that she's rewarded!"

"Yes, I will at... Huh? What did you just...?"

"Heh heh heh. Not only did I receive no reply to the most important message of my life, but it was forgotten completely. I've never experienced such incredible abandonment before!"

The chamberlain grew uneasy about the future of the country.



"Stop, Martina!" Elliott begged. "I really don't know anything! How many times do I have to tell you that those books are all nonsense?!"

"Ha ha ha, don't be silly, Your Highness. Where there's smoke, there's fire," Martina noted ominously.



Sofia pushed again, saying, "Come, come, young mistress. If you stay put, the ladies will use up Miss Punching Bag."

"Nooo..." Rachel wailed. "Stop! It's not fair! It's not fair!!!"

"Aaagh?!" Margaret yelped.

"I can't get enough!" Duchess Somerset exclaimed. "This feeling... It's simply irresistible!"

Countess Marlborough agreed with her one hundred percent. "It's a rich sensation, but it doesn't overstay its welcome. Oh, there isn't another butt like it in all the world!"



"Um, should we stop serving you properly too?" the chamberlain hesitantly asked.

"You fool," Raymond replied. "I only want to be mistreated by older girls. It doesn't work with men."



The duke left the prison to stare up into the sky in the rear gardens.

“It only started with that idiot breaking off their engagement, so how did it turn into such a debacle?”

Feeling a tap on his knee, the duke looked down to see Rachel’s pet monkey offering him a glass of whiskey.

“There’s no use fretting about it. Have a drink.”

“To think I’d have a monkey trying to console me. Hold on, you little chimp. That’s from a bottle Rachel took from my collection, isn’t it?”

“And?”

Looking away from the monkey, who was tilting his head to the side because he wasn’t sure what the objection was, the duke gazed up into the heavens once more. The great, cloudless sky looked down on all the confused people of the world, never saying a word. The fine weather seemed to be laughing off all petty human concerns, and the duke naturally sighed for some reason.

“Ah... The sky sure is blue again today...”

Afterword

Thank you for buying the second volume of this series as well as the first.

This is the conclusion of Rachel and her friends' story. I hope you were able to enjoy the chaos all the way to the end.

They say that characters are an extension of the author, but the characters of this work are so full of character that I really don't want to think that's true.

Rachel was born into a ducal house, with both money and power, and she's also a quick thinker, so she does everything flawlessly. In a story like this one, I feel like it was mostly her strengths that came into play, but there's also a hedonistic, short-sighted side to her. That's why she sometimes takes advantage of incidents without solving them, and why she enjoys the shut-in life in prison. Despite her ability to predict things, she doesn't think much about what's going to come next. She already has everything, so there's nothing she wants to do. She's a jack-of-all-trades, but a master of none. That's frustrating to her servants, and it also worries them, but at the same time, they're in awe of her.

Elliott, conversely, thinks he can do anything, but he can't. He has dreams and a sense of pride, but he doesn't notice that no one views him as highly as he views himself. I don't want to think I'm like him either, but in the opposite way from Rachel. To tell you the truth, if they could have gotten along, Rachel and Elliott might have been the best kind of couple, able to augment each other's shortcomings. They didn't get along, though.

Margaret has gumption, and that's about it. Her methodology is poorly thought out. She's not just going nowhere, but she also can't get over the walls she runs into. She's found one working formula and is trying her best with it, but she doesn't realize it won't solve all her problems.

George, Sykes, Wolanski (whose first name we never did learn), and the other members of Elliott's group. Haley, and the members of the Black Cats of the Dark Night, chiefly Sofia, Lisa, and Meia. The king, daddy duke, the grand duke, the prime minister, the commander of the knights, and all the people of the palace, including the prison guard, of course.

I ended up with a lot of characters, but all of them, from the

protagonist to the nameless side characters, have a few screws loose. There are no perfect people here. There aren't any in reality either, so it feels unrealistic to have perfect people even in a fictional world. And the characters can only act in ways the author can think of, so all these slightly off-kilter characters may really be an extension of myself.

I wrote this in the afterword of the previous volume, but sometimes characters take on a life of their own and write themselves.

When I'm writing a novel, I'm recording scenes that I imagine as animations inside my head. I convert the images into words, and then tie the scenes together. That's why, when I can't put the images I saw into words, maybe due to a lack of vocabulary or means to express them, I can end up getting stuck. Either I can't make the conversion, so I can't move forward, or I can't tie the scenes together, so it doesn't form a story. And sometimes I can't imagine anything at all. That's what causes writer's block.

However, with this novel, the ideas came one after another, and I was having a hard enough time just writing them all down. I sometimes had multiple conflicting scenes and had to make hard choices about which to keep. I think the high-strung state of my late-night brain may have had some effect on that, but that's just how well I was able to get into the characters. They created their own scenes.

When writing the text for a work like this, my pen flows smoothly. When connecting scenes, or if I'm not in the mood, it's easy to end up with mechanical, forced, boring writing. But in cases like this, where I'm itching to write the next scene, amusing phrasings just come naturally as I clack away at the keyboard. When there are little jokes in the prose, many of them were born from that state of mind.

When you look at it that way, it feels like *Prison Life is Easy for a Villainess* exceeded my expectations in a miraculous way to end up in its current form. I almost feel as if the characters wrote half of it by themselves. In that sense, the reason it was so well received and the reason it was able to become a published book is thanks to the characters.

This is the end for Rachel and the rest, but they'll go on living in the world of this work. If there are later stories I can't put into text, I hope that Rachel, Elliott, and the rest of the crazy but lovable cast can find a happy future.

And so, with the hope that I'll be blessed with such a wonderful cast again with a new work, I set my pen down and end this story.

Thank you for joining Rachel and the rest of the gang over the course of these two volumes.

By the way, during serialization, Elliott was called "too stupid," but looking over other works in the broken engagement genre, this

author is of the opinion that Elliott's not that big of an idiot. It's just that maybe those other stories don't have a villainess who responds to a slap on the cheek by swinging a nail bat at you...

With a hint of loneliness,
Hibiki Yamazaki

*Prison
Guard*

Margaret Poisson

Wolanski

Instead,
the improvised
melody grew
and wrapped
itself around
the six
musicians,
eventually
giving birth
to a new
composition.

There was
no score,
no particular
piece they were
attempting
to play.

Elliott

Their
individual
personalities
collided and
bounced off
one another,
yet together
they formed a
single sound.

Sykes Abigail

Rachel Ferguson

And in that moment,
history moved.
It was perfection—
a perfect session.





"I won't
let you
serve
me up
like that!
I'm worth
more per
kilo than
that cheap
pork!"

"Don't run
from me,
you sow!
I'll mince
you up
finer than
the meat
in that thin
soup they
give to
beggars
in the
slums!"

Martina Evans



Author:
Hibiki Yamazaki

Illustrator:
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima



PRISON LIFE *is* EASY *for a*
Villainess 2

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in that thin
soup they
give to
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in the
slums!"

Martina Evans



"Adam!
Adam!
Adam!"

"Squeeeeeeeeeee!"

"Hi
there,
you
adorable
little
kitties."

Adam

"If you
don't cut
this out
at once,
I'll=!"

"Hey,
listen
to me!"



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Prison Life is Easy for a Villainess: Volume 2

by Hibiki Yamazaki

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KONYAKUHAKI KARA HAJIMARU AKUYAKUREIJO NO
KANGOKU SLOW LIFE GE

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